

**“PLAYBOY”**

**GARY  
HART**

**My Life  
In Wrestling...**

By GARY HART  
With PHILIP VARRIALE

# **My Life In Wrestling: With A Little Help From My Friends**

**By Gary Hart**

**with Philip Varriale**

## **Dedication**

*To all the wrestling fans who supported me over the years.*

*To all the wrestlers I managed and booked.*

*To all my young boys who died too soon.*

*I thank you from the bottom of my heart.*

# Foreword

My life changed forever the day that this young, arrogant, quick-talking wrestler was introduced to me as my manager. I was as green as grass in the wrestling business, and had no clue how Gary Hart would affect my wrestling career.

Our mentor was Burt Ruby, a promoter in Michigan. There were wrestlers like “Leaping” Larry Chene, Ricky Cortez, Lou Klein, Ivan Kalmikoff, Gino Brito, Lord Anthony Landsdown (Johnny Powers,) The Great Mephisto, Mr. Kleen (Ernie Bemis,) and many other great wrestlers to work with. Bert’s territory was our training ground, and both of us listened to everything he said.

There is much more to the wrestling business then what goes on under the lights in the ring, and Gary Hart was very quick to catch on. He was a master heat-getter on the microphone and at ringside, and it wasn’t long before Gary learned how to manipulate with the best of them.

I wore a mask, went to the ring in a cap and gown, and wrestled as The Student, while Gary wore dark suits that really made his blond hair stand out.

With Gary Hart’s leadership, it took us a month before we were headlining the main events in all of Burt Ruby’s towns. We wrestled five nights a week, as well as three television matches and a house show every Saturday.

We did all kinds of angles. When Gary was banned from the arena, a beautiful blond showed up at ringside, jumped up on the apron, and hit Larry Chene with her purse that had a brick in it.

A riot started when the fans realized “she” was Gary Hart.

I realized we were doing pretty well the day that Gary Hart showed up in front of my home with his first car. Gary was now a big shot, and had a brand new, white, Chevy Impala convertible. He was so proud, and I was happy for him. We took off for a show in Lansing, Michigan, with the top down, and I noticed that Gary was driving a bit erratically. All of a sudden, he lost control of the car, and we were in a field. I screamed, “What were you trying to do - kill us???”

Gary got this funny look on his face and said, “Well, Jim, you teach drivers-ed, don’t you?”

Gary had never driven a car before! However, he could talk, and somehow, bought this car without a driver’s license. After three weeks of teaching him how to parallel park by his place in Detroit, Gary could drive – but his new car was pretty beat up.

It was almost as dangerous going to the ring with Gary Hart, because he would do anything to get heat. Whether he was saying terrible things about an opponent’s wife, or calling



the audience every name in the book, I was always standing on the apron ready to help him if needed.

At one show in Grand Rapids, Michigan, three fans had heart attacks and died during our match. The next week during our TV interview, Gary boasted, “We killed three fans last week, but that’s OK, none of them were ringsiders.”

Eventually, Gary and I had the opportunity to work in a much larger venue: The Cobo Arena. However, we were working in the shadow of the promoter, The Sheik, and it was becoming obvious that it was time for us to move on to bigger and better things.

I chose to continue teaching and coaching full-time, and start wrestling in Pittsburgh on a part-time basis. Gary went on to become one of the greatest managers, bookers, and television producers in the wrestling business.

My experience of learning the wrestling business with Gary paid off big time as I became George “The Animal” Steele, and Gary Hart will always have a special place in my heart.

Thanks, Gary.

Yours from the beach,

Jim Myers

# Chapter 1: Chicago

If someone would have asked me to write this book ten years ago, there's no way I could have done it. I came into the business at a time when kayfabe was the Holy Grail, and for over thirty years I would not talk about the business to anyone that wasn't a part of it. Over the past few years I've softened, and can now openly talk about how wrestling is manipulated - but it was a long process that I had to go through. When I sat down to write this book, I knew I would have to be as open, honest, candid, and upfront as I could possibly be about my career, and I stayed true to that. I'm very comfortable with everything that's in here, because it's all factual and it comes from my heart. I also don't mind if people speak ill of me after reading this, because as long as the truth of what happened is out there, then I'm happy. Here's my story...

Every summer, I went to stay with my favorite uncle, affectionately known as Uncle Butterball, for two months. He lived in the country, and for a kid from the streets of Chicago like I was, it was a great experience. I was ten when I was first introduced to professional wrestling by him in the summer of 1952. He was a big fan, and together we would watch televised wrestling that came from the Chase Hotel out of St. Louis, Missouri. I was awestruck by wrestlers like Pat O'Connor, Rip Hawk, "Wild" Bill Longson, Sonny Myers, Lou Thesz, and Dick Hutton - and in no time at all, I became a huge fan, myself.

When I returned to Chicago, I discovered that wrestling was also on TV there. In addition to the local Chicago wrestling promotion, we had wrestling from the Hollywood Legion Stadium in California. It was sponsored by Tafon, which is "No Fat" spelled backwards. One of the top stars of that organization was Jules Strongbow, a big Indian wrestler. I recall him taking Tafon in an attempt to lose weight, and each week on television, they would weigh him. Besides Strongbow, the California wrestling show also featured Danny McShain, "Wild" Red Berry, and "Classy" Freddie Blassie.

During my teens, I was a big swimmer. I loved it so much and was so good at it that I actually became a competitive swimmer, joining the Chicago Youth Organization, and participating in swim meets at the Y. When I was 16 years old, I was in a swimming competition in Fox Lake, Illinois, and I met someone who would change the course of my life: Billy Goelz.

Billy was a wrestling star in the Chicago market, and he just happened to have a house on the lake where we were having our swim meet. As soon as I saw Billy, I recognized him because he was the Midwest Heavyweight Champion, and was very recognizable from his TV appearances. I went over and introduced myself to him and told him I watched him on TV. After chatting a bit, he asked me if I had ever been to the wrestling matches live. When I said that I hadn't, he told me to come to the Marigold Arena that Friday night at 5:00 p.m., and he would get me in.

That was the first time I ever went to the live matches - and I totally fell in love with wrestling. After a while, Billy got me a job at the Marigold Arena. I worked with a guy named Roland, who was the custodian of the building. He had been a wrestler, but had gotten injured, so Fred Kohler, the local promoter, gave him a job. Billy would also train a few guys how to

wrestle, so I started pestering him to train me, as well. During the summer of 1958, Billy told me to come to the arena every Saturday at 8:00 a.m. so we could wrestle for an hour-and-a-half. The best part was that, because of my job, if the ring was left up during the week, I could go to the Marigold and work out with Roland.

In addition to my job at the Marigold, I had a part-time job working at the riding academy in Lincoln Park. Horses would be rented out for people to ride through the park, and my job would be to go find the people who were late bringing the horses back to the stable. Working two jobs was not a big deal for me, though, because I always had a solid work ethic. During my youth, my mother managed different restaurants, and I would often work in the restaurants alongside her.

Because of my job at the Marigold, I got to see all of the matches there for free – whether it be wrestling on Friday nights or boxing on Wednesday nights. I went in and out of the arena freely, while fans and wanna-be wrestlers and boxers would stand at the back of the arena trying to get in. The wanna-be's would have their bags with them in case a wrestler or boxer didn't show up, in the hopes that they would be asked to fill in, while the fans would be there hoping to catch a glimpse of the "stars."

One of the wrestling fans that I met there introduced himself to me, and told me his name was Sam Casino. I figured that he wanted to get to know me because through me, he could get into the "inner sanctum" of the wrestling world, but even after I explained to him that I was only training to be a wrestler, he still wanted to be my friend. He even told me that he owned a boxing and wrestling club, and assured me that I could train there anytime I wanted.

We soon became friends, and eventually, Sam offered me yet another part-time job – this one on Mondays and Thursdays. In addition to running his gym, he was in charge of picking up the change from all of the machines in town: Slot machines, cigarette machines, shuffleboard machines, gum machines...if a coin went in it, Sam collected the money from it, and he offered me \$75 a day to assist him on those trips. After one run with Sam, we could have seven-hundred pounds of change, which we would take back to his club and unload. In the beginning, I really didn't know what I was getting involved in. All I knew was that Sam was a nice guy who gave me a job two days a week picking up coins, and sometimes packages of cash. One day I asked him, "Why do some people give us coins and some give us cash?"

Sam was quiet for a minute, and then responded, "You don't want to know."

I knew right then that something bad was going on, and shouldn't have continued working for him, but I did. Sam and I spent a lot of time at his club, and since he had beds and a kitchen there, I would often stay all night. One night, a truck pulled up behind the club and Sam asked me to help him unload it. That started to happen more frequently, and over time, we unloaded televisions, suits, coats, radios, watches...you name it. If there was a truck, Sam's friends would find it, bring it to his club, and we would unload it.

After Sam got to know me and realized that I was a straight-up guy, he told me that he ran a crew for the Chicago crime syndicate. Basically, he was into loan sharking and stealing

stuff out of the back of a truck, and his club was just a front for his fencing operation. One of the reasons he trusted me with potentially damaging information like that was because we were both involved in businesses that had to be protected. In those days, wrestlers had to kayfabe everything. It was beaten into our brains: Don't talk to anyone about anything. As I was training for the business, I abided by that, and if somebody tried to play smart with me and act like wrestling was fixed, I would act dumb. To smarten someone up would be the kiss of death, because if you squealed on the business, you could get your arms or legs broken by one of the wrestlers, and you would never be allowed to wrestle again. Basically, back then, the wrestling business was just like the mob. People involved with both of those businesses had to know how to keep a secret.

Even though I knew it was wrong, the money was good, and as time went by, I became seriously involved with organized crime. On a few occasions while making our pickups, Sam would warn me that there might be trouble, and though I never saw anybody get killed, I did see Sam get violent when someone owed him money. On more than one occasion, when we stopped at a bar, Sam would go into the coat room, get a metal coat hanger, go up behind a guy sitting on the barstool, slap the coat hanger over his head, jerk him off the bar, and drag him out of the building. I saw him kick the crap out of people as cops drove by without stopping, and I also saw him beat people up with pool cues. I hit a few people with pool cues myself back then - but I was never the aggressor. It's just that sometimes situations can get out of hand - and it becomes every man for himself.

During this time in which I was getting indoctrinated into organized crime, I was continuing my training with Billy at the Marigold. Billy told me from the beginning that he would teach me holds, but that he wouldn't put any pressure on them. He simply wanted to show me the moves. Occasionally, he would tighten up and show me how I could seriously hurt somebody, and whatever joint it was - the wrist, elbow, shoulder, knee, ankle, or head - I felt it immediately. He would make it very clear that he didn't want me to use pressure, and just wanted me to go through the motions when I wrestled. He also emphasized that when throwing forearms or punches, I should stay away from the ears, eyes, nose, and throat. A couple of times during training, my head would get busted open, or my eye or nose would get bloody, and I got that the hardway. That taught me early on that when your opponent places you somewhere, don't move, or it will throw off whatever he is planning on doing to you.

At night, I would hang out at Sam's club and show the guys the holds that Billy was teaching me. There were some old shooters and hookers like Lou Talaber and Ruffy Silverstein at the club who liked to take guys and stretch them, so everyone preferred working out with me instead - because I wouldn't hurt them. I wasn't exactly what you would call a "wrestler's wrestler," but I knew the moves, and by practicing holds on the guys at Sam's club, I really improved my technique. I actually improved so much that Billy asked me if I had been working out somewhere else. In reality, I only had one day a week to work out with Billy, so his curiosity was understandable. When I told him that I had been spending time at Sam Casino's gym, Billy told me that I should stay away from that place, because he felt I had a future in wrestling, and by hanging out with Sam, I could end up in jail. I assured Billy that I would never do anything illegal - although I wasn't being honest with him.



The only other wrestler I knew that was involved with Sam and his crew was a guy named Wayne Bok. He was a wrestler in the Chicago area, and he also worked as muscle for the Chicago outfit. One night, when I arrived to the Marigold, Billy told me that Wayne had been killed. After telling me that, he added, “The people that you’ve been hanging around with beat him to death in the warehouse district, and if you’re not careful, they’ll do it to you, too.”

Once again, I assured him, “Billy, I’m not as involved as you think I am.”

Even though I was, I loved Billy and respected him so much that I hid the truth from him. I also hid it from my family and my friends, and with the exception of a few people, this is the first time I’ve ever opened up about the organized crime portion of my life. I should add that back then, I never looked at myself as someone who would continue doing that for a living, though, because I knew I was going to be a professional wrestler. I simply saw my work for Sam as a means to support me until what I chose to do for a living would support me. That was the way I looked at it, and I never considered becoming a career mobster.

One night I went to the matches at the Marigold Arena, and there was a fan sitting near me who was clutching a 2x4. As hated Russian Nicolai Volkoff – who was actually a guy named Steve Gob – was heading up the aisle after his match, the guy ran at him and was obviously going to hit him, so I tackled him to the ground. The cops grabbed me and brought me back to the dressing room, but Nicolai recognized me as the one who helped him, and told them to let me go. The following week, during my training session with Billy, Nicolai just happened to drop by. When he saw me he couldn’t believe it, and told Billy what I had done and what a good kid I was.

There was another young guy that Billy was training to be a wrestler, and his name was Paul Christy. At the time, Paul was a competitive bodybuilder, and he and I wrestled each other a lot. For a while, Paul and I actually lived on the second floor of Billy’s wrestling gym, and we became very close. Paul was a Chicago boy, and while he never got involved with gangsters like I did, he would hang out with con men and run all kinds of scams, such as selling memberships to non-existent gyms. Paul was a real scam artist, but I felt that was wrong because he was ripping off individual people, whereas I was just a “strong arm guy” collecting money from people who had borrowed and refused to pay back. So even though I really liked Paul, I stayed away from his scams and didn’t get involved in that at all. And I don’t want to make him sound like a bad guy – because he wasn’t. It’s just that when people grow up on the streets, they develop their own little ways of getting by. Paul was a great wrestler, and if he would have left the city, he could have had a great career, but he preferred the hustle life in Chicago.

At the time, Billy was the matchmaker for Chicago promoter Fred Kohler, and after fourteen months of training, he felt I was ready for my debut match. I was 6’4” and 235 pounds, and while I didn’t have a muscleman body, I had a solid swimmer’s build, because I did a lot of swimming, bike riding, pushups, Hindu squats, and running in the park to stay fit. I was never the kind of guy who was constantly hitting the gym, but in my time, very few wrestlers did. As soon as I was told that I was going to have my first match, I started thinking about my ring name. My real name is Gary Richard Williams, but I didn’t think that would cut it, and I wanted a name

that would fit on a marquee easily. Gary had four letters, so I kept my first name and came up with a four-letter last name: Hart.

I always liked the name Hart. My Uncle Buck was in the Marine Corps with a guy named Hart Key, and Hart saved my uncle's life at the Chosen Reservoir during the Korean War in 1950. My uncle always referred to Hart Key as "the man who saved my life," and I always remembered and liked that name. It even meant so much to me that when I was 16 years old, I got a tattoo of a heart on my arm. Not only did the name Hart mean something to me personally, and not only was it a great marquee name, but I also realized that if I used that name, I could put hearts on my boots, tights, and jacket as a little gimmick. It was perfect, so I told Billy that I wanted to be called Gary Hart.

Billy liked my idea, but tweaked it a bit to Hurricane Heart. He also wanted me to dye my hair blonde and bill me as being from Orlando, Florida. Even though it wasn't what I originally hoped for - whatever Billy wanted was fine with me. My debut match took place on Thursday, May 5, 1960, when I wrestled Sailor White in Beloit, Wisconsin. I guess I did well, because Billy booked me for the next night against Tony Shepherd at the Marigold Arena. Both times, I wrestled to a fifteen-minute draw, and I wasn't nervous at all. Billy started booking me regularly after that, and even gave me a slight push.

In those days, if you weren't in your 30's or 40's, promoters wouldn't look at you as a serious wrestler. For a booker to put an 18-year-old on TV and give him a push was something that just did not happen, but thanks to Billy, I became one of the first young wrestlers ever to get great exposure. As a mid-card heel, I immediately started wrestling guys like Billy Goetz, Johnny Gilbert, and Bobby Managoff throughout Illinois, Wisconsin, Indiana, and Iowa. Things were going great, until I was booked against Zack Malkov. We wrestled four times, and every time we wrestled, he hurt me one way or another. He didn't hurt me to the point where I couldn't wrestle - but he did hurt me to the point that the pain was intense. Believe it or not, even after having several matches, I still wasn't completely smart. After a particularly harsh match with Zack, I found Billy and asked, "Why is it that when I work with you, Johnny, or Bobby, everything is so nice, but when I work with Zack, I always end up getting hurt?"

"Go talk to Zack," Billy suggested. "Tell him what you just told me, and ask him what you're doing wrong."

I followed Billy's advice and found Zack, asking, "Mr. Malkov, I'm wondering something. When I wrestle with you, I keep getting hurt. Am I messing up or something?"

"Kid, you're doing fine," he chuckled. "Don't worry about it."

I guess he felt bad and was amused by my naiveté, because whenever we wrestled after that, he loosened up on me. Zack wouldn't be unique in that regard, though. I eventually started going up against guys that had been wrestling since the 1930's. In those cases, I was a teenager, my opponents were in their late forties, and they weren't all that willing to help a young kid like me. There was a lot of jealousy and resentment. They never offered advice, and they got a kick out of stretching and pounding me, trying to give me cauliflower ears, stepping on my hands, and

bending my joints. It was their way of taking out their anxieties because their career was coming to an end, while mine was just beginning.

Even though I understood their mindset, it was trying on me, because there was nothing I could do. If I tried to wrestle them back, they would hurt me, so as the new kid in town, I took the hazing like a man, and after my experience with Zack, simply kept my mouth shut. Billy tried to keep me away from people who he thought might deliberately hurt me, but he couldn't protect me from everyone. And when I did get injured in the ring, Billy expected me to handle it like a pro and go on with the match.

There was another wrestler named Jules "Speedy" LaRance, who was a tough old hooker and a shooter in his late 50's. One night, Speedy and I were booked together, so I asked Billy what he wanted us to do. Billy suggested I talk to Speedy about it, so he could tell me what he wanted. I walked over to him as he was tying up his shoes, and chirped, "Hi Speedy! We're working together tonight! What do you want to do?"

"Who the hell are you to call me Speedy?" He growled. "My name is Mr. LaRance."

My heart was thumping in my chest as I went back to Billy stammering, "I just went over and asked Speedy..."

"You called him Speedy?!?" He gasped. "You should never call him Speedy!!"

Billy had me scared to death, but Speedy quickly came over laughing, telling me I could call him by his nickname. That was the first rib ever pulled on me.

Even though I was making \$25 a night as a wrestler, I was making so much money with my side job in the mob that I was able to afford a suite of rooms at the Chateau Hotel. I was living like a star, and once I started appearing on TV, Sam really enjoyed hanging out with me. He especially liked to be seen with me in restaurants and bars because he saw me as a celebrity. In those days, being on TV was really special. It's not like today where seemingly everyone is on television. Back then, you really had to be somebody. Keep in mind that I was just an underneath wrestler, but in Sam's eyes, since I was on TV, I was the same as Buddy Rogers or Johnny Valentine. He didn't understand that there was a pecking order in wrestling – but being compared to Buddy and Johnny was fine by me, because they were the best of the best. They were my idols, and whenever I was on a card with them, I didn't waste any time sitting around the dressing room. If Buddy or Johnny were in the ring, I was out there watching them. They were the guys who really inspired me, and I spent a lot of time studying them.

Angelo Poffo and Bronko Lubitch had been a successful team in the 1950's, but when they split up, Angelo started looking for a new partner. One night, after a match at the Marigold, I walked into the dressing room, and there stood Angelo, Buddy Rogers, and Johnny Kace. Angelo commented on my match, telling me I was pretty good in the ring, and that I had a lot to offer. I appreciated that, but didn't pay too much attention to it. Of course, if Buddy Rogers had said it, I would have pissed myself. A few weeks later, we were in Madison, Wisconsin, and it was Angelo and I against Billy Goetz and Johnny Gilbert. Angelo and I just clicked that night, so

he asked that we be put together as a permanent tag team. We were, and not only did I serve as Angelo's tag team partner, but I also served as his manager, as well. I soon found that I enjoyed being a manager more than I did being a wrestler, because I was very relaxed on the microphone. I never got nervous, and just went out and said what was on my mind.

There weren't too many managers around during that time. "Wild" Red Berry managed The Fabulous Kangaroos, and there was "Handsome" Johnny Barend and "Magnificent" Maurice, but it was Buddy Rogers' manager - Bobby Davis - who I really liked. He was real cocky and dressed very well, and I actually fancied myself as "the poor man's Bobby Davis," because he was the manager I aspired to be. I even thought if I could be as good as him, then I could make it in wrestling. Even though most of the managers were older wrestlers dispensing their wisdom on younger wrestlers, with me, the fans were probably wondering what this young kid could have to offer a seasoned veteran. I understood that, so in the beginning, I basically distracted the referee. I served as Angelo's lookout, acted like a sneaky kid to divert attention, and quickly learned how to get heat.

One night, when Angelo was wrestling Antonino Rocca in Waterloo, Iowa, I jumped up on the ring apron and hit Antonino. As soon as I did that, the referee disqualified Angelo, and a full-scale riot broke out. The aisles filled up and there were hundreds of people who wanted to kill me - cops included! Being a guy who understood that violence gets everyone's attention, I picked up a chair and skipped it through the crowd like a rock on a creek. I threw five of them until the mob finally backed up, and Angelo and I made our way to the dressing room. When we got there, Moose Cholak started screaming at me, "What were you doing out there!?! Throwing those chairs could have hurt somebody!!"

I was still revved up with adrenaline, so I screamed back, "What did you expect me to do? They were trying to kill me out there!"

Now, Moose was really mad at me, because on top of throwing the chairs, I had the audacity to argue with him. He got me back, though. I was supposed to ride back to Chicago with him that night, but he wouldn't drive me, and I had to take the bus.

Most of the time, Angelo and I would travel together, and sometimes Angelo would bring his sons, Randy and Lanny, to the towns with us. Since we were heels who would invariably get heat, Randy and Lanny put a bunch of rocks in the back seat of their fathers Cadillac...for a rainy day. One time, Angelo and I got unbelievable heat when we were in Madison, Wisconsin, and as we left the arena that night with the boys, the fans started throwing rocks at us. Randy and Lanny, who were great kids, sprang into action and started throwing the rocks they had collected right back at the fans.

During the early 60's, The Untouchables was an extremely popular TV show. To capitalize on its success, two Italian wrestlers named Lou Albano and Tony Altomare dressed up in tuxedo jackets, wore fedoras, smoked cigars, and called themselves The Sicilians, playing mob characters. They came to the Chicago market and really took the town by storm. That was one of the most original, unique gimmicks in wrestling, and Lou and Tony were fabulous in that role. Lou Albano was actually one of my idols when I was a kid, and the few times I had the

pleasure of being around him, he was everything I thought he would be. However, the Chicago crime syndicate didn't like the fact that Lou and Tony were using The Sicilians gimmick, and Sam told me that some "associates" of his had approached them, advising them that while they could continue wrestling as The Sicilians, it would be in their best interest to stop imitating gangsters. As a result, The Sicilians promptly took off their mobster outfits while in Chicago.

One day, Sam asked me to take a drive with him to his cousin's place. We jumped into his car, drove to Irving Park, and pulled into a gated driveway that led to a huge house. When we walked into the living room, there sat none other than the infamous mob boss in all of Chicago - Tony Accardo. I recognized him instantly because over the years I had seen his picture on TV and in the newspapers. I knew right then and there that I wasn't involved with small time crooks, and that I was dealing with big time organized crime. I guess Sam picked up on the fact that I recognized Tony, because on the way home, he tried to play Tony down, telling me not to believe what I read in the papers, and that he was just a "businessman." I didn't buy it, and that incident really got me thinking about if I wanted to continue working for Sam.

Shortly thereafter, there was another scary incident that got me wondering what I was doing hanging out with mobsters. One night after the matches, another wrestler named Buddy Austin and I went to a pub named Uncle Charlie's, which was located right around the corner from the Marigold Arena. It was a local place where mobsters, boxers, and wrestlers hung out. Sam Casino was there with some friends of his, so I sat with him and we started talking. Meanwhile, Buddy was getting pretty drunk, and Buddy did some crazy things when he was drunk. That night, for some reason, he unzipped his pants and started to take a leak on the leg of one of the mobsters. Needless to say, the mobster went crazy and attacked Buddy. I started to go help Buddy, but Sam stopped me and told me he would take care of it. He calmed the other mobster down, and asked him to leave. The mobster started walking out the door, but then pulled out a gun and aimed it at Buddy. Fortunately, the gun misfired, and the mobster ended up whacking Buddy across the face with the gun two times before leaving. There is no doubt in my mind that if it weren't for the gun misfiring, Buddy would have been killed that night.

Once a month, Fred Kohler would move his wrestling show to the Chicago Amphitheater, a much bigger venue than the Marigold Arena, which is where the shows were normally held. When Kohler ran the Amphitheater, the New York booking office, which was owned by Vince McMahon and Toots Mondt, would send their talent in for that week. McMahon and Mondt booked the big names in wrestling: Buddy Rogers, Johnny Valentine, The Fabulous Kangaroos, Brute Bernard, Skull Murphy, Mark Lewin, Don Curtis, Antonino Rocca, Bobo Brazil, and the Graham brothers: Dr. Jerry and Eddie. When New York sent in their talent, we would be assured of having a very good week.

However, on January 24, 1963 - my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday - Buddy Rogers lost the NWA World Title to Lou Thesz in the Maple Leaf Gardens in Toronto. Since Buddy was one of their guys, McMahon and Mondt were infuriated by the title change, and in defiance, seceded from the NWA and formed the World Wide Wrestling Federation. As a result, they stopped supplying talent to Chicago - and the Chicago market died.

At that point, in need of some “name” talent, Fred Kohler brought Jack Pfefer into the picture. Jack was an unscrupulous promoter who had his own crew of guys with names that sounded very close to those of legitimately famous wrestlers, like Bummy Rogers, George Valentine, Hobo Brazil, “Sweet Cat” Siki, and Little Cat Wright. By billing wrestlers with those names, casual fans didn’t realize that they weren’t seeing who they were led to believe they would be seeing until they had already bought a ticket. That was Jack’s modus operandi, though. Once, when he had a falling out with Toots Mondt in New York, he rented an airplane, flew over New York City, and dropped fliers listing the results for all of Toots’ matches that would take place later that night. Even after doing that, Jack was able to keep finding jobs in the business because desperate promoters – such as Fred Kohler – felt they needed him because he was “in” with the newspaper people, and that he had them in his pocket.

Billy told me in no uncertain terms not to get involved with Jack Pfefer. He told me that Jack was so disrespected that he had no credibility with anyone of importance, and that if I became known as one of “his boys,” I would be dead in wrestling, have a stigma attached to my name that I would never be able to live down, and would be considered persona non grata to other promoters. He implored me to stay away from the Chicago territory and to start taking dates in other territories. Aside from the fact that the Chicago market was dead, Billy really wanted me out of the situation I was in with Sam Casino. He truly felt that I would end up in jail - or worse - if I continued to hang around with him. To get me out of the situation I was in, Billy even made arrangements for me and Angelo to work for promoter Bert Ruby in Michigan.

From day one, Billy Goelz took amazingly good care of me. He took me under his wing, trained me how to wrestle, put me on TV, really looked after me, and when the time was right – got me booked in another territory. He truly cared about me, and I will always appreciate and remember him for the kindness and concern that he showed me.

When I told Sam that I was leaving Chicago, he was very happy for me, and to show his appreciation for my work and friendship, he threw a nice party for me at his club. A lot of the guys that Sam was associated with came, but no wrestlers were there, because I always kept those worlds separate. During the night, everybody came up to me and gave me an envelope of cash, and I left that night with \$900! Sam also made it very clear that if I had any problems in Michigan, I was to let him know.

Although Sam was always very kind to me, he did put me in many dangerous situations, and I shudder to think how things could have ended up for me had I continued working for him. Therefore, in retrospect, Vince McMahon and Toots Mondt pulling out of the NWA and forming the WWF was a blessing in disguise for me.



## Chapter 2: Michigan

Angelo Poffo and I left to Michigan in April of 1963, where we started working for Bert Ruby. Bert's partner in the territory was Jack Britton, who controlled all the midget wrestlers, such as Fuzzy Cupid and Little Beaver. Bert and Jack had an office at the Eddystone Hotel, and across the street was another hotel called the Paul Revere Hotel, which is where I stayed.

Michigan is where I dropped the Hurricane Heart name and officially became "Playboy" Gary Hart. I was excited to finally be using the name, and I added the "Playboy" in homage to my hometown Chicago - where Playboy magazine was based out of.

One night, Angelo and I were in Akron, Ohio. Bear and alligator wrestling were scheduled for the evening, but the guy that was supposed to wrestle them didn't show up. The promoter - Pedro Martinez - told me that if I wrestled the bear and the alligator, I would get an extra \$50 payoff. At that time, I was making \$25 a night, so I jumped at the chance to make more money. Before the match, the bear's trainer told me to stay behind the bear and ride him, and that eventually, the bear would reach back and flip me over. Then, we could go around like amateur wrestlers. So I went out there and did what he said, and I actually had a pretty decent match with the bear.

Wrestling the alligator was a little different, however. The trainer told me that alligators have tremendous power closing their mouths, but almost no power at all opening them. I was assured that he would be cold and sleepy when the match started, so I was to immediately jump on his back and half nelson him, keeping my hand over his mouth so he couldn't raise it. When the time came for my match with the alligator, his box was put in the ring and the trainers started pounding on the sides. That was the cue for the alligator to crawl out. They kept hitting the box, but there was no sign of the alligator. They finally tipped the box on the second rope, and out slid the alligator. Immediately, I jumped on his back, clamped his mouth shut and started rolling around with him. He was completely unresponsive, so I got off the alligator, grabbed him by his tail, and pulled on him a little bit. At first, the audience was gasping "Oooh!" and "Ahhh!" but eventually, the match started going nowhere quick, so I eventually rolled the alligator over and covered him for the pin. After I pinned him, I got up, and the alligator stayed on his back. It turns out I had been wrestling a dead alligator. If that wasn't enough, the people started booing me because they thought I had killed it. To top it off, Pedro Martinez didn't want to pay me the \$50, because, "The alligator was dead and the match didn't count."

When I demanded my money, he taunted, "What are you going to do about it, punk?"

I pulled out a razor and said, "I'm going to take this razor and cut you across the top of your head."

I always carried a razor with me, and had used it in scuffles I had when collecting money with Sam Casino. I did not like being intimidated or messed with, and I would have had no problem cutting him for my \$50. He sensed that I was prepared to do it, so he immediately gave me my money - but I was still pissed. Before Angelo and I left that night, I grabbed a car jack

and broke the headlights, front windshield, and rear window of the hearse that Pedro Martinez rode in. He was so fat that he actually rented a hearse and had someone chauffeur him around while he slept in the back. After what I did, though, there was no way that fat bastard would be able to get any sleep during his trip back to Cleveland that night - but that's what he got for trying to stiff me.

During the summer of 1963, Angelo quit wrestling because he had accepted a gym teacher position at a school in the south side of Chicago. I was sad to see him go, because he had afforded me a great opportunity in wrestling, and I will never forget how much he did for me. Once he left, though, Bert Ruby encouraged me to go around and wrestle as a single, suggesting I keep an eye on the talent to see if there was anyone else I would like to manage. At the time, Bert had guys like "Leaping" Larry Shane, Louie Klein, "Crybaby" George Cannon, "Flying" Fred Curry, Gino Brito, and Jim Myers on his roster. The only one that really caught my eye was Jim, but he already had a tag team partner and manager named Louie Pompano. However, as fate would have it, soon after I noticed Jim, Louie had a heart attack and died, and that was when I made my move. Jim had been wrestling for one year, and since I had been around the business for five years, Bert was pleased that I offered to take him under my wing.

Although Jim was interested in having me manage and develop his career, he made it clear to me from the get-go that he was not interested in becoming a full-time wrestler. His main love was teaching, which is what he did during the work-week. Wrestling came second. I had a clear understanding of that from the beginning, but still, I saw something incredibly special in Jim and was determined to develop his career, so he could fully realize his potential in the wrestling business.

We were an odd pair - to say the least. I was a street kid from Chicago who used to run with the mob, and he was a college graduate from Michigan State, a teacher in the Detroit school system, and six years my senior. Boy, does that sound like a buddy film gone bad, or what? It actually surprised me that we clicked together so good, because we bonded really quickly, and became the most unlikely of friends.

Jim and I spent a lot of time together, and really traveled together a lot. I would pick him up at school at 4:00 p.m., we would drive to whatever town we were supposed to be in that night, and after the matches, we would be back home by 2:00 a.m. The next day, Jim would get up and go to school, and I would sleep all day. At the time, Jim wrestled under a mask and was billed as The Student. His gimmick was that he was a student of wrestling, and the announcer, Alan Ruby - who just so happened to be the promoter's son - would invariably ask me why I constantly referred to him as The Student of wrestling when he never used a hold, to which I would become over-defensive and angrily insist, "He's trying to learn! Give him time! He will develop!"

Eventually, Jim started using his first hold - a finishing maneuver called the hammerlock. The Student would pick up his hapless opponent by the arm and walk around the ring with him, forcing him to submit. I would then jump in the ring, instruct him to drop the hold, and then march over to Alan Ruby's desk and order him to tell the people that The Student was "clearly learning," and that they should shower him with applause and recognition. After I forced him to

make those announcements several times, Alan got tired of my bullying, refused to acquiesce to my demands, threw down his microphone, and stormed off the set.

That was, of course, the setup for a feud between myself and Alan Ruby, and was the first time I ever had a one-hand-tied-behind-my-back match. We had that match throughout Michigan, and the audiences loved it.

It was in Michigan where I realized that I had a knack for coming up with clever finishes, and the other guys in the dressing room quickly picked up on it, as well. After hearing me give my ideas to Jim every night, some of the other wrestlers started approaching me to see if I had any good ideas for their matches. Jim pulled me aside one night and told me not to give away my ideas, pointing out that we were competing against them as it was, so if I started giving them my ideas, we would be competing with me, to boot!

In no time, The Student had become a tremendous attraction, and before we knew it, we were Bert Ruby's top heels. Jim and I were so successful that we started to get noticed by promoters from other territories. It was in early 1964 that I was first introduced to a promoter named Jim Barnett, because he had come to Michigan scouting talent for his new promotion that he was starting in Australia that year. Picture Elton John twenty pounds lighter - and that's what Jim Barnett looked like back then. He wanted to bring me and Jim Myers over to Australia, but we had to turn it down, because the tour would have interfered with Jim's teaching gig. That was alright, because there were other promoters interested in us, as well. Bert ran all of Michigan except for Detroit, which was run by Eddie Farhat, aka The Sheik. Bert's promotion did air on Detroit television, though, so eventually The Sheik contacted Bert and asked if he could use me and Jim in the Cobo Arena and on his TV in Windsor, Canada. Bert agreed, and The Sheik started booking us regularly.

Since we were Bert Ruby's guys - and not The Sheik's - some of the guys on his crew would look down on us. That was because Bert Ruby's promotion was looked at as minor league, and I understood that. When I went to work for Bert after leaving Chicago, I considered it a step down, because he didn't use the NWA logo, the NWA Champion, and like I mentioned earlier, didn't even run in Detroit. Lord Athol Layton had been a wrestler of some note in the Toronto area, and he ended up becoming the announcer for The Sheik. From day one, Lord Layton treated me and Jim like we were second-hand trash because we worked for Bert Ruby. He walked around like a big-shot and treated Jim and I like a couple of local-yokels.

Jim and I didn't care, though. We just ignored him and anyone else who looked down on us for our association with Bert, and focused on getting ourselves over in Detroit. For one particular television taping, Jim and I came up with something to really get some heat. The Student was wrestling a young kid, and he would constantly throw him out of the ring so I could get some cheap shots in from alongside the ring. The fans were going crazy, and then suddenly - and completely unbeknownst to me - Lord Athol Layton jumped up from his announcing position and grabbed me, telling me to cut it out or "we would get kicked off of TV."

This wasn't an angle. This was his ego and sheer dislike for me taking over. However, there was such a tremendous reaction by the fans when Lord Athol Layton grabbed me that The

Sheik booked us in a match at the Cobo Arena! The other main event that night was The Student vs. Bobo Brazil. Now, the only reason Jim and I got those plum spots at the Cobo was because The Sheik had a real bad case of hemorrhoids, and needed to have an operation on his ass. His hemorrhoids were so severe that he had to shove a large Kotex up his crack because of the constant bleeding. Since he was going to have to miss one of the shows at the Cobo, he was outwardly telling people that he was “worried” the show wouldn’t draw without him, but he was secretly panicked that someone else would do better business and usurp his top spot in Detroit. Therefore, The Sheik put me and Jim in the top two matches that night because he wanted guys in the main event spots who he felt he could control. Lo and behold, we packed the arena that night. Regardless of how good we did, though, The Sheik quickly pushed us down the card, and never capitalized on our main event successes. He definitely continued using us, but would never let us get higher than the semi-final.

I would like to mention that even though I knew that Bert Ruby didn’t get a lot of respect in the business, I also knew I was very fortunate to be working for him. Bert was from Hungary, and had escaped during the early days of World War II before Hitler came through. He immigrated to the states and was always grateful to America. And even though he was not a big time promoter, he developed a lot of talent, such as Killer Kowalski, The Sheik, Brute Bernard, Bulldog Brower, and many others. I listened to every word he had to say, and after having a mentor like Billy Goetz, I was very fortunate to have found such a wonderful second mentor in Bert.

At the time, Bruno Sammartino was the WWWF Champion, and he would come into the Cobo Arena every now and then to defend his title. Whenever he would come in, he would be surrounded by an entourage of guys like Angelo Savoldi, Arnold Skaaland, and Phil Zacko, and was basically unapproachable. In February 1966, Bruno and his crew saw Jim Myers in the ring as The Student, and were so impressed that they asked him to come to Bruno’s territory in Pittsburgh for a weekend. Since I wasn’t invited, I didn’t go. Jim was stunned when he came back, because he had wrestled in high school auditoriums and made \$500 each night. In Michigan, meanwhile, we were making \$100 a night wrestling at the Cobo Arena!

Eventually, Bruno asked Jim to wrestle in Pittsburgh full-time, promising to only book him on weekends so it wouldn’t interfere with his teaching job. Combined with his teaching gig, that guaranteed Jim a great living. Unfortunately, they weren’t interested in me, and Jim asked if I would have any hard feelings if he took the job. Of course, I didn’t, and felt that whatever was best for Jim was best for me. So after more than two years together, Jim Myers and I parted ways. I’m proud to say that we began as friends and parted as friends, and to this day we’re still best buddies and talk a couple of times a month. He’s the greatest guy you would ever want to meet, was the first guy in the industry that I became close to on a personal level, and is like a brother to me. Of course, after his run in Pittsburgh, Bruno introduced Jim to Vince McMahon in the WWWF, and Jim became a staple in New York as George “The Animal” Steele.

Aside from the money, it was completely understandable why Jim wanted to get out of Michigan. With The Sheik as the main event wrestler in Detroit, he would never get an opportunity to move up on the card, and would forever be toiling away on the semi-main event. Plus, we didn’t know it at the time, but The Sheik was doing everything in his power to keep me

and Jim down. Frank Tunney and his nephew Jack used to come to Detroit regularly to scout talent for their promotion in Toronto. Jack Tunney told Jim many years later that he and his uncle had tried to get Jim and I booked in Toronto, but The Sheik kept preventing it from happening, claiming we “didn’t want to.”

“Killer” Karl Kox was a major wrestling star, and was wrestling for Dory Funk, Sr. in Amarillo. He came up to Detroit for a brief tour, really took a liking to me, and asked me if I would be interested in moving to Amarillo. We talked for a bit, and then he put me on the phone with Dory Funk, Sr., who asked if I would be interested in wrestling for him. I explained that I really enjoyed managing and developing talent, and that I wasn’t sure I wanted to make my living solely as a full-time wrestler. Dory, Sr. was very blunt, and told me that he didn’t use managers and wasn’t interested in me as a manager, but that he would hire me as a wrestler.

Even though I wasn’t thrilled with the prospect of going to a territory where I was only getting an opportunity to wrestle, it was time to move on. My experience with Jim Myers really built my confidence in molding and developing wrestlers, though, and I loved every second of it. I knew that I would eventually concentrate on managing and developing talent, but for now my sights were set on continuing my wrestling career in Amarillo, Texas.

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## Chapter 3: Amarillo

I arrived in Amarillo in early 1966 and moved into the Downtowner Hotel, because that's where Karl Kox suggested I stay. What a culture shock Amarillo was. I spent my life in cities like Chicago and Detroit, where everything was open twenty-four hours, and where I could go to the movies after I came home from the matches. In Amarillo, the movie houses were only open on the weekends, and everything closed down at 8:00 p.m. – even the restaurants. I learned quickly that unless I bought food before I went to the matches, I wasn't going to eat that evening. And before I had time to fully deal with the culture, I was given another shocker: Dory Funk, Sr. wanted to name me “Gay” Gary Hart.

“I want you to be a Gorgeous George type of guy,” he told me as my jaw dropped. “I want them to think you're a queer.”

“I'm ‘Playboy’ Gary Hart from Chicago,” I explained. “And I really don't want to present myself as a gay guy.”

Dory, Sr. wouldn't budge, though. He wanted a gay wrestler on his roster, and told me, “Well, your name is already ‘Gay’ Gary Hart, and I'm not changing it, so you better come up with something.”

Now, it's not that I felt I was too “manly” to play a gay character or anything like that - it's just that I just didn't feel it was right to make fun of homosexuals. Actually, the heat-getting gay gimmick wasn't a revolutionary concept in wrestling. There had been Gorgeous George, “Handsome” Johnny Barend, “Magnificent” Maurice, and Rikki Starr before me, who had all done the stereotypical skipping and prancing around the ring, enraging the fans. Dory, Sr. really wanted a character like that in Amarillo, so I had no choice but to acquiesce. So as per Dory, Sr.'s wishes, I wore white trunks and boots with red hearts, and a pastel blue, red, and pink jacket. I dressed the part, but I didn't want to just swish around the ring and act like a “gay guy.” Instead, I wanted to come up with a unique twist for my character so I didn't have to rely on the same old gay stereotypes. I asked Dory, Sr. if it would be alright if I gave a rose to the ugliest woman in the audience every night on my way to the ring, and Dory, Sr. gave his approval. So every night, I would come out and find the biggest, fattest, ugliest woman in the arena, and I would present her with a rose and declare, “This is for the most beautiful woman in the state of Texas.”

That really infuriated the people. It also got my character away from the “Gay” gimmick, and just made me more of a creep. However, no matter how hard I tried to steer my character in another direction, all the guys in the dressing room knew that the persona of “Gay” Gary Hart was supposed to be that of a queer, wanted nothing to do with me, and tried to avoid working with me. Dory, Sr.'s two boys didn't have any choice, though, because they did whatever their father said. Therefore, I was immediately put in a program with Dory Funk, Jr., and the first time I ever met his brother Terry was when I was wrestling Junior at the Amarillo Fairgrounds. I knew that at some point in the match, Terry would jump in and attack me, but I had never met him because the heels and babyfaces had dressing rooms on either side of the building. I was



pounding on Junior, when suddenly there was a roar from the crowd. I looked up, and there was Terry in the process of jumping over the top rope. He missed, caught his foot, and collapsed in the middle of the ring. Junior just looked at me and deadpanned, "Meet my brother Terry."

Eventually, I started a feud with Terry, and we got into a really hot program. During one of our matches at the Odessa Fairgrounds Coliseum, I busted Terry open pretty bad, and we took the match out of the ring and to the front of the building where the concession stands were. As Terry went out the front door, I started back to the dressing room. However, the fans had me trapped in the concession stand and weren't about to let me go. Thankfully, Professor Tanaka and Art Nelson came out to save me. Tanaka got about forty stitches in his head from people hitting him with chairs, and Art got stabbed in his leg and back during the melee. They got me to the back, but once we were there, Art was really upset with me, screaming, "You stupid idiot! You could have gotten us killed! What were you doing fighting in the concession stand?!?"

I started to apologize and explain that Terry and I just got carried away, but Art cut me off, saying, "This is serious business, kid. You could have gotten killed. If it hadn't have been for Tanaka and I, what do you think would have happened to you? You have to learn how to gauge your heat."

Not only did Art save my life that night, but he taught me a valuable lesson, as well. Dory, Sr. eventually put me and Art together as a tag team, but Art wasn't too thrilled to have "Gay" Gary Hart as his partner. Aside from not liking my gimmick, I'm sure he was still upset at me for the time he had to save me in Odessa, so he treated me like I didn't exist, and generally wasn't very nice to me. One night in Albuquerque, New Mexico, Art and I were in a 2/3 falls match against the Funk brothers. We went to a fifteen-minute draw the first round, and I never went over and tagged Art in. I really didn't think anything about it - it just never entered my mind. Before the second round, I asked Art if he wanted to start. Art assured me, "No, kid, you're doing fine. Go ahead."

After wrestling for about three minutes, Dory, Jr. told me to tag Art in. I went to my corner and held out my hand, but Art wouldn't tag in, insisting, "You're doing fine, kid! You don't need me!"

I went back to Junior and mouthed, "He won't tag me!"

Junior looked concerned and tagged Terry in, who whispered, "What's the matter? Is Art mad at us?"

Nobody in their right mind wanted Art Nelson to be mad at them, because he was a real tough guy. I dropped the second fall, and before the third round, I asked Art, "Do you want to start?"

Once again, he shook his head, and said, "You're doing just fine. I'm enjoying myself right here in the corner."

I worked the third round and took that fall, as well. When we got to the dressing room, Art wouldn't look at me. That wasn't unusual, though, because he never looked at me. A few weeks later, we were booked in Lubbock against the Funk brothers. I asked Art who he would like to start the match, and he replied, "Well, in the last match we had against them you started, so I think you should start again."

Once again, I started the match, and after a few minutes I went to the corner and tagged Art in. Art went around a couple of times with Junior and Terry, and then tagged me in. I went around for about three minutes and tagged Art, and as I did, he grinned at me and said, "Now you're learning how to be a tag team wrestler."

At that moment it clicked in my head why he was so mad at me. He thought I had tried to steal the show and hog the first round in Albuquerque. After that match in Lubbock, things definitely improved between us, although I wouldn't say that Art and I became friendly, because he really disliked my "Gay" Gary Hart gimmick, as did most of the guys in the dressing room. I have to say that Gory Guerrero was great, though. He realized that no one wanted to work with me, stepped right up to the plate, gave me some of the greatest matches I ever had in my life, and really boosted my confidence. He was a wonderful guy, and I appreciated the time I got to spend with him and the good matches he gave me. Danny Miller, on the other hand, offered me nothing but abuse. He looked down on me and couldn't figure out why I was getting a push while he was toiling away on the middle of the card. He and I were programmed in a series of matches, and I guess he resented wrestling "Gay" Gary Hart, because during our matches he would stretch me and cackle, "Hey, kid, how does this feel?"

One time, we were in Colorado City, and he was stretching me beyond belief. My left hand was free, so I shoved my index finger in his belly button as far as I could, and he screamed like a girl. I wasn't a shooter, but I could bite, kick, and hit - and if there was an orifice, I would go for it. Every time I saw him after that I would hold up my finger and taunt, "How did that feel?"

He had nothing to say to me and never bothered me again.

The trips in Amarillo were long and horrific - up to four-hundred miles each way. I mostly traveled with Dick Murdoch - though he wasn't wrestling at the time. He was just a 19-year-old kid, and was known as a second - wherein he would sit at the timekeepers table and watch our backs. If anybody tried to jump a wrestler or sucker punch us, Dick would knock them out. He was our security, and I saw him knock out lots of people! His father, "The Fabulous Texan" Frankie Hill Murdoch, had been a wrestler in the territory for a long time, but by the time I was there he was quite ill with emphysema and just served as a referee. To entertain ourselves during our travels, Dick taught me how to shoot jack rabbits out of the car. We both had guns, and as we traveled down the highway, if we spotted a jack rabbit, we would open fire. During my time in Amarillo, Dick and I must have killed thousands of jack rabbits. I wouldn't be surprised if there weren't any jack rabbits in west Texas anymore, because it feels like we killed them all.

The young guys in the territory were Dory, Jr., Terry, Dick, and I. Everyone else was 40 or older, so the four of us bonded really quickly. Dick and the Funk brothers were very close. It's funny, because even though Dick Murdoch never went to West Texas State University with them, he was looked at like the school mascot, and it eventually became like kayfabe, and nobody would admit that Dick didn't go to there – because he was so loved and respected by everyone. When it comes to the Funks, Terry and I have always been closer than Junior and I. As much as I love Junior, he can be kind of aloof and is not real easy to become chummy with. So even though I do consider Junior a friend, Terry and I have always been a perfect match.

Even though Terry and I were in a program and weren't supposed to travel together, sometimes we had no choice. One time, Terry and I wrestled each other in the opening match in Hereford at 7:30 p.m., and then we had to get ourselves to Plainview so we could wrestle in the main event. It was dark when we left the arena in Hereford, and all of the fans were inside the auditorium in Plainview, so we threw caution to the wind and traveled together. Most nights, Dick and I would secretly meet up with Terry after the matches, and we would ride the oil wells. We would bring some beer, crawl up the head of an oil well, settle ourselves on the pump, and ride the oil well while we drank our beer, talked about life, and shot at jack rabbits. One night, Terry and I drove out to the desert to shoot some jack rabbits. We fell asleep in the car, and when we woke up the next day, we realized there had been a hellacious rainstorm. Because we were in the desert - we were basically stuck on an island, and it took until 4:00 p.m. until the water ran off and we could drive out of there! Everyone was worried about us, because no one knew where we were. I had a lot of great times with Terry.

Jack Pfefer left Chicago and came into Amarillo for a while. He was in charge of the female wrestlers, and brought them in to work for Dory, Sr. I had a low opinion of him because of what Billy Goetz told me, so Terry and I went out of our way to aggravate him. For example, we would flirt with his girl wrestlers, which would make Jack go crazy! Jack was an odd character who had all these weird rules, like declaring no one could whistle in his presence, and insisting that no one should put their hat on a bed.

During my stay, Dory, Sr. came up with a finishing maneuver for me: The eye claw. He instructed me to grab hold of my opponent's eye and not let go. Then, he would have my opponent sandpaper their eye, so the next time the fans would see them, it looked horrific. Dory, Sr. even asked if I would cut my fingers when I was applying the claw, so blood would run into my opponent's eyes, and make for a dramatic effect. Of course I did it, but the only bad thing was that whenever I ate popcorn or potato chips, my fingers always burned! That hold really got me over as a maniac, though, because it seemed like I didn't care if I was disqualified or not - I was just out there to hurt somebody.

At the time, Fritz Von Erich was a major figure in wrestling based out of Dallas. He invented the head claw and rocked the wrestling world with it, headlining Buffalo, Cleveland, Toronto, and Detroit, which is where I first met him. Dory, Sr. brought him in to wrestle me for a series of claw vs. claw matches, and we did good business. Fritz remembered me from Detroit, and saw firsthand what I had done for Jim Myers career, so he asked if I would ever consider coming into the Dallas territory to manage and develop talent. Even though Dory, Sr. was giving me a good opportunity to be a wrestler, I knew I would never be a Buddy Rogers or a Johnny

Valentine. I was also getting tired of west Texas because there was nothing to do there but shoot jack rabbits. Dallas, on the other hand, was a major city. It sounded like a good deal, and when Fritz assured me that I could come in as “Playboy” Gary Hart, I was sold.

When I told Dory, Sr. I was going to Dallas, he tried to talk me out of leaving Amarillo by encouraging me to focus on my wrestling career. I explained to him that even though I loved wrestling for him and enjoyed my matches with his sons, I had a burning desire to develop talent, and I really didn’t like the persona of “Gay” Gary Hart. Dory, Sr. understood, and couldn’t have been nicer, assuring me that if things didn’t work out in Dallas, I would be welcome back in Amarillo. He then added, “Do me a favor, and every now and then when you’re on Dallas TV, mention my boys.”

Of course, I promised him I would - knowing it could only help me on interviews to brag about how I beat up the Funk brothers in Amarillo. I was very appreciative of the opportunity Dory Funk, Sr. gave me. Even though he wouldn’t let me manage and develop guys the way I wanted to – he showed me I was valuable and paid me very well. He was a dynamic guy, and every wrestler who ever worked for him would have cut their head off for him, and I was no different. We all loved him, yet we were afraid of him, too, because he was so tough. I may have been a street kid who hung out with gangsters, but he was the real deal. I know because I wrestled him.

I was unbelievably fortunate, because for the third time in my career – and in just the third territory I had been in – I had found yet another great mentor. Billy Goetz, Bert Ruby, and Dory Funk, Sr. really deserve a lot of credit for getting me ready to be able to handle myself in the business – and for my future success. And as grateful as I was to be working for Dory Funk, Sr. – I knew it was time for me to move on.

## Chapter 4: Dallas

At the time, there were two booking offices out of Texas. One was in Amarillo, owned by Dory Funk, Sr. and Doc Sarpolis, and the other was in Houston, owned by Morris Sigel. They were two separate entities with no ties together other than both being part of the NWA. Each booking office was responsible to supply talent for their specific towns – Dory, Sr. handled west Texas, and Morris controlled the rest of the state. That was unusual, because aside from California, where Roy Shire ran San Francisco and Mike LeBelle was in charge of Los Angeles, most states had one booking office.

The Dallas territory – which got their talent from Morris Sigel out of Houston – was run by Fritz Von Erich and Ed McLemore. Ed was a very wealthy guy who owned twelve radio stations throughout Texas, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Oklahoma, and used to bring in musical acts like Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis, Eddie Arnold, and Hank Williams to play the Sportatorium. After Fritz graduated Southern Methodist University with a degree in business administration, he went to work for Ed as his bookkeeper, and as time went by, Ed started running wrestling shows in the Sportatorium, which is how Fritz broke into the wrestling business.

When I arrived in Dallas in the fall of 1966, I moved into the Alamo Plaza Motel, and was told that I would be managing the team of Karl von Brauner -who had been in a successful tag team with his “brother” Kurt, and Al Costello - who had been in The Fabulous Kangaroos. When I was told I would be managing them, I wasn’t exactly overjoyed. Don’t get me wrong - I had the greatest respect for Karl and Al, but I just didn’t think they would make a good team. More importantly, I didn’t want someone else to select talent for me. I was hoping to choose the guys I would manage myself. In any event, I was determined to get Al, Karl, and I over in Dallas, and in order to do that, everyone had to be on the same page. When there are four wrestlers, a manager, and a referee involved in a match, everyone must work together, and be as cooperative as possible to make it the best match possible. “Dirty” Dick Raines was an old-time wrestler who was refereeing in the Dallas area, and he was very helpful to me in that regard. During Al and Karl’s matches, Dick would allow me to distract him, and would get into heated arguments with me that the fans just ate up.

Our arguments got over so well that we eventually came up with the idea that I should wrestle him with one arm tied behind my back. Of course, I got that idea from my feud with announcer Alan Ruby in Michigan. Dick and I wrestled in five major cities throughout Texas, and each time I put Dick over. To show you what a great guy Dick was, every night after our matches, he would insist that after I get my arm untied, I should come over to him and beat him up so that I could get my heat back. Unfortunately, not all referees were that wonderful. Marvin Jones, a referee who had quite a bit of influence in the office, took an immediate dislike to me for some reason, and set out to make life as difficult as possible for me. Marvin was anti-Gary Hart in every way, and refused to react to anything I would do during matches in which he was the referee and I was the manager. I would try to distract him, and he would ignore me. I would yell at him from the ring apron, but he wouldn’t turn around. I would roll under the bottom rope during a match, and he wouldn’t flinch. It was as if I wasn’t even there.

Referees are so important in wrestling. A good referee can add excitement and pandemonium to a match by doing little things, but Marvin refused to do anything that might get me over the slightest bit. Then, in the office, he started telling anyone who would listen that tag teams would “never draw in Dallas,” planting seeds of doubt in everyone’s head about how successful Al, Karl, and I could be.

In 1966, Dallas was not a tag team territory. Yes, there had been the occasional tag team, but Marvin put me in a position where I had to prove that a regular tag team could make it in Dallas, and the onus was literally on me to find a tag team that Al and Karl could draw money with. At the time, Fritz and Waldo Von Erich were portraying evil heel Nazi brothers, but weren’t a tag team per se. Fritz was the number one heel, and Waldo was the guy who the babyfaces would beat before they faced Fritz. I went to the office and asked if Al and Karl could be booked in a match against Fritz and Waldo. Even though heel vs. heel matches had been done in Texas, Danny Plechas, the booker, was totally against it. After insisting and arguing that the territory needed something fresh, Danny finally relented and agreed to give my idea a shot. When it was time to give the interview to promote the match, I went on TV and proclaimed, “Fritz and Waldo Von Erich are not really Germans. Waldo is Canadian, and Fritz is a Texan whose real name is Jack Adkisson – and he went to Southern Methodist University! The Von Erich’s are total phonies, and are afraid to wrestle Al and Karl.”

In those days, there was no editing of tapes. The shows ran as they were recorded, and whatever was said went out over the air. When I went back to the dressing room, Danny was furious with me for my promo, and immediately called the station to see if they could take the interview out. They couldn’t, and it was left in. I explained that I did it to promote the match, and kept apologizing, but in reality, I wasn’t sorry. The territory was dead and needed to be boosted, and I knew it was the right thing to do to build up heat for their match. Besides, everything I said was true. Fritz did play football and throw discus for SMU, and he even played football for the Dallas Texans - so it’s not exactly like I was exposing the business.

The night of the match, when Fritz and Waldo came to the ring for their match against Al and Karl, the fans went crazy! People mobbed them on their way down the aisle, and they were treated like heroes and turned babyfaces instantly. It seems as soon as I told the people that Fritz was a hometown boy, Texas just fell in love with him. Plus, even though Waldo was not a Texan, just by his association with Fritz, he was loved, as well. After I created the first Von Erich babyfaces in Dallas, business picked up immediately.

Meanwhile, in Houston, Morris Sigel was gravely ill, having suffered several heart attacks. When he died right after Christmas 1966, his right hand man and television announcer, Paul Boesch, bought the Houston booking office from Morris’ widow. However, the Dallas territory was doing so well that Fritz Von Erich and Ed McLemore conspired to literally steal the booking office from Paul by taking control of the talent and moving the booking headquarters from Houston to Dallas. That meant that all of the Texas promoters who had gotten their talent from Houston now had to get their talent from Fritz, Ed, and the Dallas office.

The reason Fritz and Ed were able to pull off that major coup was twofold. First of all, their wrestling show out of Dallas was on KTVT - a large cable channel that played throughout



Texas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, Arkansas, and New Mexico – while Paul’s TV show only aired in Houston. Any Texan promoter who might have spoken out against Fritz and Ed for their hostile takeover had to consider the fact that they controlled the largest cable channel in Texas. The second reason was the NWA. Even though the NWA was the governing body of wrestling, and one might think they could have gotten involved and protected Paul’s booking office, Fritz had powerful friends like Sam Muchnick, Bob Geigel, and Jim Barnett - established NWA members - who were firmly in Fritz’s corner because he had worked for them and made them a lot of money.

Paul Boesch was in a no-win situation, and had no choice but to make a deal with Fritz and Ed and start accepting talent from Dallas. For my first booking into Houston, I went in to the Houston Recreation Center, managing Al and Karl. When we got our pay, I noticed that Al and Karl got \$200 each, while I got \$75. I always got the same payoff as the guys that I managed, so I didn’t understand why things would be different in Houston. I went right to Danny Plechas, the booker, and demanded to know why I got shortchanged. I explained that I was just as important to the match as Al and Karl were, and if I wasn’t needed at ringside to help them draw, they shouldn’t have booked me that night. I was angry, but Danny asked me not to make a scene with Paul, assuring me that he would straighten everything out.

The following week, we went back to Houston, and Al and Karl made \$100 each, while I made \$50. Now, I was pissed. Once again, I went to Danny and demanded to be paid the same as what Al and Karl got. Danny offered to pay me the difference out of the Dallas office, and while I appreciated his offer, it was the principle. I wanted to be treated right by the promoter I was working for, even though I was savvy enough to understand that Paul Boesch had an ulterior motive for paying me less than I deserved. Paul was mad at Fritz and Ed for taking his booking office, but since he couldn’t do anything to them, he took it out on me. Paul was clever enough to realize that I was the reason for the Dallas office’s recent success, and figured if he could chase me away, he could do some real damage to Fritz and Ed and reclaim his booking office. Even though I knew why Paul was deliberately messing with me, out of respect for Danny, once again I bit my tongue.

Business was so good that Paul booked the Sam Houston Coliseum for the next week. Paul wanted to get into that arena so badly that he actually mortgaged his home and put a deposit down for a year in order to get it! For the first big show, Paul booked Fritz and Waldo vs. Al and Karl, and I wrestled underneath. Paul grossed \$13,000 that night, and paid Al and Karl \$300 each. I got \$150. And not only did I manage in the main event, but I also wrestled! I found Danny and demanded, “I want to talk to Paul Boesch! He stole money from me two weeks ago, he stole money from me last week, and he stole money from me tonight. Enough is enough!”

We found Paul standing in the shower talking with Pepper Gomez, and when Pepper walked out, Danny and I walked in. In a condescending voice, Paul asked, “Well how can I help you?”

“I haven’t been very happy with my payoffs.” I said.

“Well, you’re only a manager,” he sneered. “If you were more than that you would deserve more money.”

As soon as he said that I slapped him as hard as I could right across his face. I don’t think anybody had ever done that to him before, but obviously, he had never messed with a street kid from Chicago. Right then, Danny grabbed me and pulled me out of the shower screaming, “Don’t you ever raise your hand to a promoter in front of me again!”

I just pulled myself away from Danny and stormed out of the Coliseum. The next day, Karl, Al, and I were booked in Beaumont, which was a Paul Boesch spot show, but I didn’t show up. Al called me and tried to sweet talk me by saying he and Karl felt bad about what happened - but they didn’t. They were just happy to be making main event money and didn’t care what I made. Anytime I wanted to take a stand on something in the past, Jim Myers was always with me. Right or wrong - we were partners and in it together. Karl and Al were different. They couldn’t understand why I was upset because I was making less money than they did, and acted like I should be happy that I was with “international wrestling stars.” Al and Karl showed no loyalty to me, and didn’t seem to understand that I was the guy who helped them become successful in Dallas.

During my conversation with Al, he mentioned that Fritz and Ed wanted to see me at their office on Monday morning. So on Monday morning, I went to their office in the Sportatorium, and sat with Fritz, Ed, and Danny Plechas. Fritz started telling me that I was “way out of line” and “too big for my britches,” and even threw in a dramatic “how dare you raise your hand to a promoter of the NWA!”

I couldn’t believe their hypocrisy, and went off on them, arguing, “You stole that man’s business! You literally stole Paul Boesch’s booking office! You waited until his boss died and then you stole what he was waiting for right out from under him! Now you’re upset with me for slapping him because he stole my money?”

They didn’t care what I had to say, though, reminding me that they were the boss and that I had to do whatever they wanted - and the first thing they wanted me to do was to drop the money issue with Paul. I couldn’t believe that they were treating me that way after all I had just done for them, because I truly believe I saved their promotion. When I arrived in Dallas, business was horrible. I went out there every night as a manager and fought my way through the crowds, getting Al and Karl over as big time heels. Then, I single-handedly turned Fritz and Waldo babyfaces, which helped draw big money in Dallas and Fort Worth. I know for a fact that my arrival in Dallas had a lot to do with the money being drawn, because believe me when I tell you, it wasn’t being drawn until I got there. Because of me, both the Dallas promotion and Fritz got over so strong that he and Ed were able to usurp the booking office from Paul Boesch and become big-time promoters in Texas! Instead of treating me like garbage, Fritz and Ed should have been on their knees thanking me!

Instead, they treated me like a dog, so I walked over to a calendar on the wall, pointed to the date two weeks from that day and declared, “On that date I will be gone.”

Two weeks to the day, I packed my bags and left Dallas.

## Chapter 5: Back to Michigan

When I left Dallas in early 1967, I went home to Chicago. I visited my sister, went to southern Illinois and saw my Uncle Butterball, and spent time with my brother. After a few weeks of that, I realized I needed to get myself situated in another territory. I had left Chicago, Michigan, and Amarillo on good terms, and could have returned to any of those areas. Unfortunately, Chicago was still dead, and after I left Amarillo I promised myself I would never go to another territory where my only option was to be a wrestler. When I left Michigan, Bert Ruby told me I had an open door policy, so I gave him a call. I knew I could go to Michigan, find a young guy there, and develop him, because a lot of great talent would regularly go through there. Plus, Bert would allow me the luxury of picking who I wanted to manage, and would let me develop them the way I chose to do it.

When I arrived in Michigan, there was a wrestler named Bobby Shane who had a place in Lansing, and he invited me to become his roommate. That was a pretty unique situation, because he was a babyface and I was a heel – and we were wrestling each other quite a lot during that time. Between our nightly matches and living together – Bobby and I became really close friends.

I was working for The Sheik one night, booked against Tony Negro, when The Sheik walked by and muttered, “Tony, get Gary over tonight. You two figure out how to do it.”

Tony just looked at me and growled, “There’s no way I’m putting you over.”

He was a big, stout English guy, and he was angry that The Sheik wanted me to win. He wouldn’t even talk to me, and by the time we got to the ring, we still hadn’t figured out an ending to our bout. At one point during the match, he leaned me up in the corner, and the next thing I knew, I woke up. As I awoke in the middle of the ring, the referee was asking me if I was okay, but I didn’t see Tony anywhere. It was obvious to me he had knocked me out, but if I potatoed someone accidentally and knocked them out, I would be the first face they saw so I could apologize – but this guy just up and left. Even though he left the ring, I gave him the benefit of the doubt and figured he hadn’t done it on purpose, because guys just didn’t do things like that. We were all taught that when somebody gives you their body, you take care of it like it’s your own. Sure, guys got stretched and stuff, but deliberately knocked out?? When I walked into the dressing room, Tony saw me and doubled up his fists. I held up my hands and instantly put him at ease, assuring him, “Hey, man, don’t worry about it. It was nothing.”

I saw him double up his fists, so I knew right then that he had sucker-punched me on purpose. I walked over to my bag and calmly put a bar of soap in my sock. Then, I walked over to him as he was taking off his shoes, and I hit him in the head as hard as I could four times. I just whacked him and knocked him out of his chair, then stood over him like I was Al Capone. Yes, it was violent, but I had been provoked.

After I left Dallas, Danny Plechas put Mike Paidousis as Al and Karl’s manager - but a great manager is born, not made. Needless to say, things didn’t go so well, and Fritz and Waldo

eventually killed them off. After leaving Dallas, Al and Karl came into Detroit, as well. Not only did I not manage them when they came in, but I didn't even speak to them, either! I was still upset that they had royally screwed me when we were a team in Dallas, because they didn't stand up for me when the money situation arose.

At one point, Karl Kox and Billy Red Lyons came in for a brief tour, and brought me up to date with all the happenings in Dallas, telling me how the territory had fallen on hard times without Gary Hart. I know it sounds egotistical, but it was clearly very hard for Fritz and Ed to replace me. Karl then told me that Fritz was sorry for the way he had treated me, and wanted me to call him. Billy always called me "Yrag Trah," which is Gary Hart spelled backwards, and while Karl was telling me this, Billy kept chanting, "Yrag Trah! Dallas is calling!"

I appreciated what they were saying, but I told them both that if Fritz wanted me, he could call me himself. Not long after, Fritz did just that. He called me and was very apologetic, saying, "I'm sorry for everything that went down. We miss you here in Dallas - you really made a big impression on everyone."

"Yeah!" I quickly added. "Especially on Paul Boesch's face!"

I wanted to bring that incident up as soon as I could, and tried to be light-hearted about it, but Fritz clearly didn't want to go there. Instead, he asked me point blank, "What would it take to get you back into Dallas?"

Fortunately, I was prepared for that question, and said, "I'll only come back if we can figure out the money situation right now. I will not make less than the guys I manage, because I'm as important as getting the people into the building as they are."

Fritz and I talked back and forth, and came up with a deal I was happy with. In those days, thirty-two percent of the house went to pay the wrestlers. Sixteen percent of that went to the main event, and the undercard got the other sixteen percent. So if there were two main event wrestlers and no manager involved, each wrestler would get eight percent of the house. Therefore, the deal was that if I managed someone in the main event, then each one of us involved would get five and a quarter percent of the house. If I was in a tag team, we would all get four percent apiece, and if I was managing a tag team in the main event, the five of us would get just over three percent each. On top of the main event money, if I wrestled underneath, I would get preliminary pay thrown in. Being the type of guy I was, I always split that with the guy I was managing, because I didn't think it was right to take my percentage from the main event, plus keep all of my preliminary payoff.

Once that was settled, Fritz and I started throwing out names of guys that I could manage, and one of his suggestions was a journeyman wrestler by the name of Don Jardine.

## Chapter 6: The Spoiler

I had briefly met Don Jardine in Amarillo during the fall of 1966, because as I was leaving, he was coming in. Don was a journeyman wrestler from Canada who had been wrestling for twelve years, and I remember being really impressed with him, so I told Fritz I would be happy to develop his career, and even offered to contact Don and recruit him myself. I tracked him down in Portland, got in touch with him, and offered him the opportunity to join me in Dallas. Don was leery at first, because he had been taken advantage of by promoters who made big promises to him, telling him he's a big, good looking guy who just needs "a little more seasoning." Then, they would just use him as a job guy. I assured him that this wasn't the case, namely because I wasn't a promoter, but also because I had been messed around with, as well, and understood his frustration. I also told him that while I didn't completely trust Fritz Von Erich or Paul Boesch, I did believe that together, we could do very well in Dallas. Besides, the worst that could happen is that we didn't like it there, and we could go to another territory. Fortunately, Don agreed to come into Dallas with me and give it a try.

I also told him that I envisioned him wearing a mask, which he didn't mind at all. At the time, I was a big fan of comic books, and I really liked this character named The Phantom. He lived in the jungle and wore a mask, so when I built the persona of who Don would be, in my mind, I was thinking about The Phantom - a big, agile guy who swung through trees and conquered evil people. That would be his story: He was a great fighter of injustice. Specifically, he would fight against the injustice of men like Fritz and Waldo Von Erich - who had banished me from Texas.

Don was a big, impressive guy, and when he put on his wrestling outfit: The mask, the long tights, the singlet, and the boots, he looked just like The Phantom. For his name, Fritz and I came up with The Spoiler.

I went to Dallas in late August 1967 - three weeks prior to The Spoiler's debut - to make appearances on KTVT hyping his arrival, and also to talk with booker Danny Plechas on how I was going to present and promote him. We got to talking about what kind of finishing maneuver he should use, and I thought that it be really great to give The Spoiler the claw - just like Fritz had. Danny felt that Fritz would put up a roadblock to that, and suggested we consider something else. I was so confident that having two guys in the territory using the claw would get over that I convinced Danny to let me present the idea to Fritz. Danny was a wonderful guy, and let me go for it. We went up to Fritz's office, I laid out my idea, and Fritz balked at it immediately. He was protective of his gimmick - and rightfully so. I understood that, but I also had the power of persuasion, or as my grandmother called it, "The Gift of Gab." I suggested that The Spoiler could wear a glove, and we can create controversy by having the announcers question if his claw is stronger than Fritz's because of help from the glove. Fritz was resistant, but took a chance on what I had to say, and agreed to bring The Spoiler in with the claw - under the condition that it was called Gary Hart's Claw.

Personality-wise, Don Jardine and I clicked immediately, and were together just three days before we decided to rent an apartment in Dallas together. Eventually, my girlfriend moved

in with us, as well. She was from Fort Worth, and I had met her during my first run in Dallas when I was managing Al and Karl. It was the three of us in that apartment, and we were one big happy family. During that time, Don was going through a divorce. When a marriage breaks up, it's a big deal, and I was there for him every step of the way. That experience really bonded Don and I, and needless to say, we became great friends.

In the ring, he was magnificent. At 6'4" and 290 pounds, he could walk the ropes from turnbuckle to turnbuckle like no one I had ever seen. He was a big, agile guy who could do leapfrogs, flying head scissors, dropkicks, and wrestle his butt off, to boot. He was a legit tough guy, and would never wrestle less than forty minutes, because he had that "Lou Thesz mentality." In addition to all of that, he was a guy who made sure I got my money. From day one, Don accepted the fact that I was his manager, and that I was handling his business, taking care of our interviews, and coming up with his finishes. Don trusted me and realized that I deserved my fair share of the payoff.

A lot of guys saw a manager as merely someone who would pull a leg or pass a gimmick to a wrestler, but I was much more than that. I took my position as a manager very seriously, because when someone put themselves in my hands, they put their family and livelihood in it, as well. I groomed Don and prepared him for success by watching his matches and giving him feedback afterwards. I wouldn't necessarily tell him what to do, but moreover what not to do. I would point out little things that were hurting him and taking away from the image that I wanted him to project, and then I would compliment him on his positives and lavish praise for the great things he did.

I also gave lots of pep talks, and my mantra was, "Let's do it in the ring." I explained to Don that our only chance for success was to win the crowd over during the time that we left the dressing room until the time that we got back. If we had fifteen minutes or forty-five minutes - our main priority was to have the best match on the card, and if it took me getting involved - so be it. We had to have the best match, and we had to steal the show every night. If we could do that, then we would have success. Our one and only job was to go out and show the promoters that when our name was on the marquee, people would buy tickets. That's all we had to sell. I made Don understand that we were a commodity in the eyes of the promoters - like a box of corn flakes or a can of Coke. If we didn't go out there and show the promoters and the fans that we were the best thing going, we would only have cheated ourselves.

Now, I respect what a wrestler has to offer, but I also know that a wrestlers' shortcoming is something that I can fix. That's why I went into managing. Don't get me wrong - I have a lot of respect for someone who can wrestle, but that's a very small part of making money, and wrestling is about making money. I made Don - or any wrestler that I chose to develop and manage - comfortable enough so the only thing he had to do was go out and steal the show every night. I made everything as easy as possible for him. My job was to promote him, put him in the right matches, select the right opponents for him, and know when to take him off the main event and drop him underneath to give him a few wins to re-establish him.

I developed The Spoiler into a major star over a three month period, and after he defeated opponents like Grizzly Smith, Billy Red Lyons, and Klondike Bill, I challenged Fritz Von Erich

to a battle of the claws. Within a couple of weeks, we had the contest set for the North Side Coliseum, and billed it as Fritz Von Erich's Iron Claw vs. Gary Hart's Claw. The stipulation was this: Fritz and The Spoiler would come to the middle of the ring, slap their claws on each other, and see who would succumb first. No wrestling - just a battle of the claws for fifteen minutes.

When the time came for the contest, they slapped on the claws, and The Spoiler instantly went to his knees. Then, he struggled back up, and brought Fritz to his knees. The building was going nuts. These two guys were sweating like pigs, and all they were doing was the claw. I had never witnessed anything like it before in my life. At the end of the fifteen minutes, Fritz was bleeding, they were both worn out, and the contest went unsolved. After the contest aired on KTVT, so many people called the station asking for it to be shown again that KTVT played it the following week. In those days, re-airing things was just not done- so that in and of itself was a big deal.

Right then, we knew that the people were begging for a follow-up contest. We set it up, and The Battle of the Claws II at the Sportatorium sold out in no time flat. When the night came, and Fritz put The Spoiler down with his Iron Claw, I jumped in the ring with a coat hanger, threw it over Fritz's neck, jerked him back, and started tightening it around Fritz's neck. If you recall, I saw Sam Casino use a coat hanger in Chicago, so this was truly inspired by my days with the mob. When I started strangling Fritz, the audience began throwing chairs at me. It wasn't a full-scale riot, but it was getting there pretty quick, so Don and I ran out the side door of the Sportatorium.

The Spoiler worked many times with Fritz, and they were always huge attractions. Business was never better, but after awhile, Fritz wanted The Spoiler to lose his mask, so we set up a match between Fritz and The Spoiler where I put The Spoiler's mask on the line. It drew a huge house, and Fritz victoriously unmasked The Spoiler. Right after that, business tanked, and the Dallas territory started dying. I implored Fritz, "We have to put Don's mask back on."

"We can't do that," he said. "I just unmasked him!"

"I don't care. Business is horrible! Besides, The Spoiler without a mask is like you without the claw."

He continued arguing with me for a while, until I said, "We really need to put the mask back on Don. If not, I think it's time for us to leave."

At that point, Fritz gave in. We put the mask back on The Spoiler, and within two weeks, business was sky high again. Even though Fritz and I would argue about certain things, he knew that I had a great mind for angles, and would often come to me for ideas. One time, Don and I were sitting in the dressing room when Fritz sauntered over. He wanted to start a new angle with a couple of wrestlers, and asked if I had any ideas. I gave him a couple of suggestions, and when Fritz walked away, Don chastised me by saying, "Gary, don't give Fritz any of your ideas unless he pays you for them!"



Much like when Jim Myers told me not to give my ideas away in Michigan, Don was spot on, and that was a great lesson. I got along with Fritz for the most part back then, and his sons really adored me. Fritz was an only child, and his wife Doris's only brother, David, had died in 1958, so their sons didn't really have a lot of uncles. They called Waldo their uncle, and one day they told their dad that they wanted to call me uncle, as well. At that point, I became Uncle Gary to the Von Erich boys. The Von Erich boys were so lovable, and I used to take 10-year old Kevin, 9-year old David, and 7-year old Kerry for haircuts, out for sodas, or just to the parking lot to play baseball or football. They would love to tell me how when they grew up, they were going to wrestle me in the ring. We would kid around and laugh, and I had a good relationship with all of them. Little Mike was just 3 at the time, and they were all good boys and a lot of fun to be with.

Kerry was the biggest Spoiler fan of all-time. On one occasion, Kerry was at the matches and his father was wrestling The Spoiler. Kerry was sitting at the timekeeper's table cheering for The Spoiler, and someone had to go out and tell him to tone it down! Kerry and I also had a little claw game, where he would try to put the claw on my head and I would cover my head, so he would put it on my belly.

Lou Thesz was scheduled to come through the territory, and Danny Plechas told me that he was booking him in a few matches with The Spoiler. Lou had a reputation for hating gimmicks - and his definition of gimmicks included managers and masked men. All the guys in the locker room were taunting us that Lou would come to town and kill our gimmick, so Don and I were on our best behavior for his first night in. I went to ringside, and even though I was never a guy that just sat down, I stayed in my corner and did nothing while Lou and The Spoiler wrestled. The next few nights, I did the same thing. On the final night in Houston, Lou walked up to me in the dressing room and asked, "Is the only thing you do sit in the corner? What are you, his shadow?"

"No sir, Mr. Thesz," I replied. "I just didn't think you would want me to get involved in any of your matches."

Lou gave me a nice smile and said, "Well, you seem like a good kid. If you want, you can jump up on the apron and get involved tonight."

I was elated! Lou Thesz just gave me his approval to get involved in his match! That was a big deal. When the time came, I jumped up on the ring apron and grabbed his tights, and he gave me the patented Lou Thesz stare. He was working, but still, it was Lou Thesz - and I nearly pissed in my pants. After that, I worked with Lou many times, and he was nothing but a gentleman to me.

Don Jardine, like me, had a 12<sup>th</sup> grade education, but he loved to learn. He was fascinated with southwestern history, and was a lover of literature. He's also an accomplished poet, and wrote a poem about us that I would recite on our interviews. The poem goes like this:

We're a perfect team, The Spoiler and Hart  
We both do our job, we both do our part.

He watches them and dares them  
I rip them and tear them.  
I'm all muscle and he's all heart.

Needless to say, Don is a very interesting, complex man. In addition to serving as his manager, The Spoiler and I formed a pretty formidable tag team in the territory, eventually winning the American Tag Team Title. That was the first, last, and only title I would ever hold. Titles meant something to the fans, and it did to some of the wrestlers, but I never put too much stock in them. Don and I didn't particularly care for that particular title, because it was a trophy and we had to carry it around in a wooden box. Don and I would leave it in every dressing room in Texas hoping it would get lost, but sure enough, the next night, some referee would come parading that trophy box into the arena.

Johnny Valentine and Wahoo McDaniel also came into the Dallas territory around this time. Johnny Valentine had the persona of someone with no sense of humor and as someone not to be messed with, but he was completely different once he knew you. I knew him since I was a kid in Chicago, and over the years I got to know him very well, and we had some great times together. Johnny and I also had a lot in common. For example - we both loved music. Sure, his favorite was opera, and mine was rock and roll - but we were passionate about our music. We also both loved literature, western history, and the Civil War.

He also had a wonderfully warped sense of humor. Just for the heck of it, he would walk around the dressing room, drop his pants, squat, and leave steaming piles of turds in random areas. Everyone had to watch where they stepped because they never knew where Johnny would leave a little "memento." One night, we were out drinking in Laredo, and Johnny was pretty gone. Johnny, Don, and I shared a hotel room that evening, and during the night, he thought it would be funny if he pissed in Don Jardine's boots, but he actually went in his own brand new pair of boots!

Johnny had an apartment in downtown Dallas overlooking Commerce Street, and one night, he had me and my girlfriend over for drinks. Johnny's wife and kids were there, as well, and we were eating, drinking, and having a good time. There was a very noisy and rowdy crowd downstairs, and when Johnny got fed up with the ruckus out on the street, he got a devilish look in his eyes. The Valentine's had six mink cats, and kept a cat litter box in the corner of their apartment. Johnny thought it would be hysterical to empty the cat litter box off his terrace and onto all the noisemakers on Commerce Street. Now, this was not your ordinary sized litter box. It was a steamer trunk, and it must have had four months of droppings in it. Johnny was intent on pulling this off, so he and I hefted it up, carried it out to the balcony, turned it upside down, and tried our hardest not to drop the trunk - fearing we would kill someone down there. From seventeen floors above, all of the cat litter and cat droppings went down on all the people.

One night, Don and I went to Corpus Christi for promoter Joe Blanchard. The place was packed, and when the envelopes came back, Don saw Johnny and Wahoo counting their cash, and realized they got more than we did. He came to me in a rage, screaming, "What's going on? They were on the undercard and are getting paid more than we are!"

I tried explaining that we don't know all the facts, and that it could be reimbursement for their transportation, or they could be getting paid for a prior match. I told him not to jump to any conclusions, but Don insisted on talking to Joe about it. We went into Joe's office, and Don told him that he wasn't happy with our payoff. Joe just sat there with his feet on his desk, smirked, and added fuel to Don's fire by challenging, "Well, I've been pissed off, but never pissed on."

Don grabbed Joe's legs and started dragging him across his desk, and in a flash, I jumped in between them and calmed Don down before it got ugly. Joe was real shaken up, and immediately gave us an extra \$100 each. So Don was right, Joe had thieved us.

## Chapter 7: Dusty Rhodes

Eventually, Don and I started looking for someone else to be his regular tag team partner. Even though I was sufficient, and we were the American Tag Team champions, the fans saw me as a tough guy who could take a beating, but not as someone who could beat a top wrestler. I realized that, and wanted The Spoiler to team with someone of his stature. One day, Don and I came into the Fort Worth dressing room for a KTVT taping, and we saw this 260-pound blonde headed kid with granny glasses on reading a book of poetry. We went over, said hello to him, and he introduced himself as Virgil Runnels. During the course of our conversation, he mentioned that his ring name was Dusty Rhodes. I'm a big fan of the movie "A Face in the Crowd," where Andy Griffith starred as Larry "Lonesome" Rhodes, so I suggested, "What about calling yourself 'Lonesome Rhodes'?"

"Well...I don't plan on being 'Lonesome.'" Dusty said, clearly unimpressed. "I think I'll stick with Dusty."

When it came time for Dusty's match, Don and I went out to see him wrestle. We liked his look, but that was all we knew. I can't say I was blown away by his finesse, because he wasn't very good at the mechanics of wrestling, and only knew how to do a clothesline and a hammerlock. I was most taken with his charisma and energy, though, and felt he would be the perfect partner for The Spoiler. The next day, we all showed up to tape TV in Dallas, and when Danny told me that Dusty was scheduled to do a job for Grizzly Smith, I was mortified. For the life of me, I couldn't fathom why they would even consider sacrificing Dusty on TV by turning him into a jobber. In those days, when the format of the evening was presented to Fritz, it was written in stone, and there were no changes. It was impossible to do. I found Fritz, and as soon as he saw me he groaned, "I don't want to talk with you today! I'm running my TV, so keep your opinions to yourself."

I paid no mind to his request, and said, "Fritz, this territory desperately needs a young piece of talent like Dusty Rhodes. Please reconsider using him as a jobber tonight."

Fritz completely ignored me, so for the entire taping I just stood behind him as he watched the monitor, and after every match I started in again. Finally, right as Dusty and Grizzly were going into the ring, I got in Fritz's face and screamed, "Fritz, this is going to be the biggest mistake you will ever make, because Dusty Rhodes has tremendous potential!"

Exasperated, Fritz asked, "If I let you go down there and change the finish, will you leave me alone for the next hour of taping?"

I was overjoyed, and as I ran towards the ring, hollered, "You won't see me at all!"

Before the match could start, I ran down to the ring, jumped on the apron, and called referee Danny Plechas over. I told him that there was a change in the finish, and that Fritz wanted Dusty to go over. Danny just looked at me like I was ribbing him, and told me to get off

the apron. I quickly called Dusty over and whispered, "Fritz really likes you. You're going over Grizzly tonight."

Dusty didn't believe me, either, and during the match, I had to jump back on the apron and instruct Danny to tell Grizzly to put Dusty over. After Dusty won, I jumped into the ring, raised his hand, and declared myself his manager. When we got back to the dressing room, Fritz was livid. He figured I would have Dusty get disqualified, but never thought that I would take it as far as I did - but it was too late. And from that day on, Dusty Rhodes was made in Texas. The following week, I debuted the new tag team of Dusty Rhodes and The Spoiler against Lou Thesz and Billy Red Lyons, and Dusty immediately became a major player in wrestling.

One time, Don Jardine, Dusty Rhodes, Danny Plechas, and I went to Corpus Christi, but a hurricane cancelled the show, so we were stuck in a hotel. We ordered food from room service, and among other things, they brought us a big glass milk bottle and a bunch of hard rolls. We were so restless being locked up that we decided to have an impromptu baseball game in our room. We played nine innings of baseball with the milk bottle as our bat and the hard rolls as balls. So as the hurricane was doing tremendous damage to Corpus Christi, we were so enthused with our game that we paid no attention.

One of the things that I could never get used to in Texas was how black people had to sit in their own section of the balcony. In the mid 60's, racial prejudice was still quite prevalent, but since I was an inner-city kid who went to school with a lot of black people, I had never looked at them as different from anyone else. I even remember when I went to visit my brother-in-law in Norfolk, Virginia, when I was twelve years old. I took a bus through Missouri, Tennessee, and the Virginias, and I saw signs that read, "Whites Only." That had a profound affect on me. I also saw how blacks were treated in the south - and it was not a pleasant thing to witness. Those experiences put something deep in my soul at a very young age, making me very sensitive to what black people had to endure.

Aside from how the black fans were segregated in Texas, I saw black wrestlers in the territory treated poorly, as well. There was a black journeyman wrestler by the name of The Sundown Kid, who actually helped train Fritz Von Erich to become a wrestler. One night in Dallas, The Sundown Kid was booked against Bob Geigel, and Bob was not happy to be booked against a black wrestler, so he went out and really abused The Sundown Kid. After the match, Fritz - who co-owned the Dallas territory - didn't say a word to Bob about it. Even though The Sundown Kid helped train Fritz in his early year, the mindset was: Abusing black wrestlers was par for the course. Back then, though, black wrestlers were rarely booked against white wrestlers in Texas. Not only did a lot of white wrestlers not want to get in the ring with black opponents, but Texas promoters didn't think the fans would want to see a black wrestler face a white wrestler. I even requested to wrestle Tiger Conway in Fort Worth, and was told in no uncertain terms that no one wanted to see that. I resented that attitude, and was intent on breaking that mindset.

Shortly after my request was denied, I went to ringside during a Tiger Conway television match to taunt him, and when he jumped out of the ring to attack me, the audience went nuts. I immediately challenged him, and promoters were forced to book us in a several matches. And

each time I put him over, every black fan in the balcony would stand up and cheer for me as I left the ring, because even though my in-ring character was that of an evil guy - they realized that deep down I was a decent man. From that day on, I had a special place in the hearts of the black wrestling fans of Texas. I am very proud to have helped broken those barriers in Texas, and to this very day, I have a strong connection with black people in Texas. On April 4, 1968, Tiger and I were on the same card, and it was the same night that Reverend Martin Luther King was killed in Memphis. I drove Tiger home after the matches, and racial tensions were at a fever pitch. When we got to his predominantly black neighborhood, he assured me, "Don't worry, Gary - they know you're with us all the way."

Tiger is a great guy, and is still a friend of mine to this day.

My career was doing well, things couldn't have been better, and it seemed like the perfect time to marry my girlfriend, as we had been together for a couple of years by then. We got married on June 19, 1968 at a friend's house. Don Jardine was the best man, and my wife's best friend Marcy was the bridesmaid. Our wedding date, June 19<sup>th</sup>, is also known as Juneteenth. That's a big holiday in Texas, because it's when the Emancipation Proclamation was first read in Texas. I knew that if I got married on Juneteenth, I would never forget my anniversary, and that's why I picked that day. If we had picked the 12<sup>th</sup> or the 4<sup>th</sup>, I would have forgotten it every year, because I was never good at details unless it involved business.

Dusty and The Spoiler were partners for quite awhile, and we all became tight friends. However, in late 1968, Dusty left to Kansas City, where he formed a tag team with Dick Murdoch called The Texas Outlaws. They were both Texas boys, and it seems wherever Texans go they eventually find each other. The Texas Outlaws made a great name for themselves in Kansas City, and I'm very proud of what Dusty went on to accomplish in wrestling. I'm also proud that I'm the one that found him.

For the Christmas 1968 show in Fort Worth, I wrestled Wahoo McDaniel, and later that night, I managed The Spoiler in his match against Johnny Valentine. The reaction The Spoiler got that night was amazing, because he was the overwhelming babyface for his match. That was the first time that The Spoiler was received as a full-fledged babyface, and it showed me just how much The Spoiler was loved by the Texas wrestling fans.

For the New Years show was in Dallas, The Spoiler wrestled Wahoo, and I had the honor of working with Johnny Valentine - one of my boyhood idols. It's funny, because even though I had known Johnny since my days in Chicago - and was actually friends with him - I was in awe of him that night, because I never anticipated that I would ever work against him one-on-one! After manhandling me for five minutes, Johnny got tired of pounding on me and just pinned me. I had never been beat up so bad in my entire life, and I relished every second of it. When we got back to the dressing room, he said he would have gone longer, but he was losing his heat every time he hit me, because the people went crazy! I have very few memorable moments in my career, but that match with Johnny Valentine is definitely one of them. That was a great thing for me, wrestling my boyhood idol Johnny Valentine.

## Chapter 8: Oklahoma

One day, Fritz told me that Leroy McGuirk was having some trouble with his territory, which consisted of Louisiana, Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Missouri. Apparently, the trips were so ungodly long that he couldn't get any quality talent to go there. Leroy had Jack Brisco and Danny Hodge, but they were local guys, and while they were great wrestlers and main eventers, there was no depth to the undercard. Fritz told me that he, Bill Watts, and Verne Gagne were going into business with Leroy in order to help him out. Verne was going to get twenty percent for sending talent in from his AWA territory based out of Minneapolis, Fritz would get twenty percent for bringing in some of Leroy's guys for exposure on KTVT - because that played throughout Leroy's territory, and Bill would get twenty percent for coming into Oklahoma and running Leroy's business for him.

Fritz then asked if he could send me and Don to Oklahoma in order to help spike the territory. KTVT aired throughout the southwest, and since fans in Leroy's cities had seen us on TV but never had a chance to see us live, The Spoiler and I would be entering as headliners. Don and I felt it was the right move, and we happily obliged to go to Oklahoma.

When we arrived in Oklahoma, I met Bill Watts, who was booking the territory. Now, Bill wasn't the recklessly maniacal tyrant that everyone makes him out to be. He would only become a tyrant when someone on his crew did not give one-hundred percent, if someone tried to take advantage of his business, or if one of his wrestlers got out of line. Yes, he would scream and holler - but he never yelled at me. We didn't have that type of relationship, nor did he have that type of relationship with Don. In all our time together, Bill and I never had a cross word.

I really got to know Bill Watts well, and we became very good friends. Both of us wanted to make as much money as we could, and since Bill could sense that I had a good eye for talent, I became his unofficial assistant, or as he put it - his "creative consultant and confidant." I spent a lot of time with him helping decide on talent - keeping in mind that they would have to drive 3,000 miles a week - and we also came up with different ways to present matches. One program that we came up with was The Spoiler against Danny Hodge.

Even though I had never met Danny Hodge, I knew of his reputation, and it was that of a tough, scary guy. When it was time for me to promote the first match between him and The Spoiler, I went out on a live interview and said that Danny was so punchy that when his alarm clock goes off in the morning, he starts hitting his wife. Danny walked right out, got in my face, looked at me like he wanted to kill me, and threatened, "Don't you ever say anything about my wife again!"

As soon as he left the room, I looked at the camera and deadpanned, "You can imagine what his wife has to put up with!"

Leroy McGuirk was the owner of the territory, and he was blind. One night, The Spoiler and I had a really exciting match against Danny Hodge in Tulsa, and the fans were going wild. When we came back to the dressing room, Leroy was asking his stooges how we did out there. I

interrupted them as they were answering, and asked him, “Leroy – how do you think we did out there?”

“I’m blind!” He yelled like I didn’t know.

Given the crowd reaction, there was no way he couldn’t tell that we just did phenomenally well, so I pointed out, “Yeah, but you’re not deaf, are you?”

Ox Baker was wrestling in Oklahoma at the time. I had known Ox since my days in Amarillo, and I think the world of him. You wouldn’t know it by the image he projects, but he’s amazingly light on his feet on the dance floor. He’s a dancing fool! I very seldom went out to bars with the guys, but I would always go with Ox because I loved to watch him dance. And he sings, too! Any hit ballad of the day, he would have it down pat and could sing it. He sang to me on more than one occasion!

Even though he was a fun guy to be with, Ox was awkward in the ring, and his opponent really had to work around him. Every time Bill Watts would work with him, he would come back to the dressing room and angrily ask Ox if he was ever going to learn how to work. Ox came to me once, upset over how Bill was always picking on him for his work-rate and accusing him of not knowing how to wrestle. To cheer Ox up, I said, “Well how would Bill Watts know who’s a good wrestler or not? He can’t work!”

Later that week, Bill and Ox wrestled again, and when Bill came into the dressing room, he said, “I’m giving up on you, Ox. You’re never going to learn how to work.”

Ox replied, “Maybe I won’t – but you wouldn’t know it if I did, because Gary Hart told me that you can’t work, either!”

Bill got red in the face, and I thought I was going to see his famous temper – but what Ox said was so comical that he had to crack up. Bill and I laughed at that story for years to come. That’s the kind of relationship I had with Bill Watts. We just clicked, and could kid each other back and forth – and neither one of us ever took it personal.

After getting situated in Oklahoma, I began to think about other wrestlers I could bring in to manage and develop. I thought about Dusty Rhodes and Dick Murdoch, and how they just had a good run together in Kansas City as The Texas Outlaws. Since I knew the both of them so well, I felt that if I could manage them, I could take them to the next level. I met with Bill and presented my idea of managing Rhodes and Murdoch, explaining how they were young guys with great potential, and if I could be at ringside with them night after night, I could develop them and tutor them on how to have a main event style match. Needless to say, Bill loved the idea, but before I could make my move and recruit them, Fritz Von Erich called me.

He said that Jim Barnett was interested in bringing me and The Spoiler into Australia for a three month tour, and asked if I was interested. Don and I talked it over, and felt that it would be a good move on our part. I also spoke with Bill Watts, and he was fine with us going to Australia. I appreciated his understanding, and was very excited for my return in three months so



that I could really focus on Oklahoma, as well as the careers of Dusty Rhodes and Dick Murdoch.

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## Chapter 9: Australia

Being in Australia was fantastic. Don and I were guaranteed \$700 apiece every week, all expenses paid. That meant that if we saved our receipts from our dinners, Jim Barnett – the promoter - would reimburse us. Don and I never did that, though, because the undercard guys were getting \$300 a week, and we were in the \$700 bracket. How greedy could we be? Most of the wrestlers lived in the Kings Cross section in Sydney, so that's where Don and I stayed, as well.

Our weeks went like this: Friday night we wrestled at Sydney Stadium in Sydney. Every Saturday morning we taped our TV show out of Sydney for TCN-9, which aired throughout the country at noon later that day. After the taping, we would jump on a plane and fly to Melbourne for our Saturday night show at Festival Hall. On Sunday morning, we went to a TV station in Melbourne to tape a one hour show that would air nationally that day at noon. After the taping we would fly to Perth for a Sunday night show. Monday morning we would fly to Adelaide for the matches that night, and then on Tuesday we would fly to either Brisbane or Newcastle on alternate weeks for our matches there on Wednesday night. Thursday morning we would fly home to Sydney, and have the night off. Then, on Friday, we would start the process all over again. It was not an easy tour, and was actually quite grueling. Australia is a bigger country than America, and while the major cities have two million people each, it's all coastal cities. In the interior, you could drive forever and see nothing. One time, the planes went on strike and we had to take trains, and there were aborigines and kangaroos running alongside the train.

I had first met Jim Barnett in 1964 when he originally invited me and Jim Myers to Australia, and it was great to see him again. He told me and Don how happy he was that we were there, and that he had great hopes for us. He wanted to give us every opportunity to get over, and assured us if we had any problems, or if there was anything we needed, we should speak with Karl Kox, his booker, or Lonnie Winters, his longtime personal secretary, and they would take care of it. Jim was a marvelous human being, and really made us feel welcome.

The Spoiler really got over well in Australia, and because of all of his abilities - the walking the ropes, dropkicking, and leapfrogging - the Australian fans fell in love with him. To say the least, I was thrilled. The prominent babyfaces in Australia were Spiros Arios, who is Greek, and Mario Milano, an Italian. Since Greeks and Italians made up eighty percent of the audience in Australia and really supported wrestling, Mario and Spiros were big draws throughout Australia, and had tremendous followings. One night at the Festival Hall in Brisbane, The Spoiler was wrestling Mario Milano, and the building was full of Italians. I had a pair of brass knuckles with me that night, and when Mario had the upper hand, I jumped up on the apron and hit him in the head with them. After my experience with Terry Funk and Art Nelson in Amarillo, I learned how to gauge my heat - and I became pretty good at it - but I definitely misjudged the response I would get that night in Brisbane, because in the fans eyes, I went overboard, and a riot broke out. Fans started throwing chairs in the ring, and it wasn't like there were one or two fans coming at me - everybody in the arena was.

Any wrestler who ever wrestled in Australia will tell you the same thing: They had the greatest security force that's ever been in wrestling. They were rugby and soccer players that Jim Barnett would bring in, pay \$20 apiece to, and offer them all the beer they could drink just to watch the wrestler's backs. Thank God for those guys, because without them, Don and I would not have made it out of that arena alive that night. When we got to the dressing room, Bert Potts, the manager of Festival Hall, was flipping out. He started screaming at me in front of everyone, and even threatened to kick my ass. Now, I don't like it when people threaten to kick my ass unless they really intend to do it. I would rather someone come up to me and punch me in my face than try and belittle me in front of people that I respect, so I grabbed him and threw him out of the dressing room. I understood why he was so upset, but I objected to the way he was speaking to me in front of my peers. Besides, it wasn't like I caused the riot on purpose! I wanted to make a good impression, and I wanted Don and Mario to do well in their match. I went too far and had a major riot. You know what? It's wrestling. Sometimes things like that will happen.

The next morning, before I boarded the plane to Sydney, Sam Menacker, who was Jim's TV announcer and close, personal friend, told me that as soon as we landed, Jim wanted to see me in his office right away. I knew right then and there that I was getting fired. I even told Don and Karl during the flight that it looked like I was getting the boot for my incident with Bert last night. Don immediately said, "You tell Mr. Barnett that if you go, I go!"

That was the way Don was, though. We were a package deal, and he was extremely loyal. I would have done the same for him, too – no questions asked.

I got off the plane in Sydney, resided to the fact that I was being fired, and was surprised to see that Lonnie Winters had sent a car to pick me up at the airport and rush me to Jim's office. It seemed like Jim couldn't wait to get rid of me! Jim Barnett's office was an elaborate room in his penthouse at the top of the Chevron, a five-star hotel in the Kings Cross section of Sydney. It was on the nineteenth floor, and overlooked the Sydney Harbor Bridge and Sydney Opera House. When I walked in, Jim was sitting at his desk wearing silk pajamas, and as soon as he saw me, he lit up and exclaimed, "My boy! It's so good to see you! Come on in!"

This certainly didn't sound like a guy who wanted to fire me, but I knew that Jim had a unique way of doing things. Jim must have sensed I was uneasy, and was kind enough to cut to the chase. He asked, "What would you think if I made The Spoiler the World Heavyweight Champion? Can I count on him dropping it before your tour ends?"

I assured him that Don was a professional and would have no problem dropping the belt when the time came.

Jim was very pleased to hear me say that, and then added "I'll take care of everything, but do me one favor. If anybody asks you what this meeting was about, just tell them I scolded you for your actions last night."

I immediately started to apologize, saying, "Jim, I'm really sorry about that..."

Jim cut me right off and assured me, “Hey, things like that happen, and Bert had no right to curse at you.”

Apparently, Sam Menacker had told Jim the truth of what happened. Who knows what spin Bert Potts put on the story when he told Jim, so thank God for Sam.

Then, out of the blue, Jim told me that Karl Kox had mentioned I was a newlywed. When I confirmed that was the case, Jim asked if he could buy a ticket for my wife to come to Australia as his wedding gift to me. I was blown away, totally honored, and I couldn’t thank Jim enough.

As I left Jim Barnett’s office that morning, I couldn’t believe what just happened. I went in thinking I was going to get fired, and not only did he tell me that he wanted to make The Spoiler the world champion, but he wanted to fly my wife over as a wedding present, as well! I was in heaven – but I was also in the mood for some fun. When I got back to the King’s Cross, everyone asked me what happened, so I gloomily said, “He fired me.”

They all grimly shook their heads, and agreed, “Well, that’s Barnett for ‘ya! He doesn’t play around, and he’ll fire you in an instant!”

Word quickly spread around that I was fired and was going home, but I pulled Don and Karl aside and told them I was just ribbing. I didn’t mention anything about Don getting the title, though, because if I did and it didn’t happen, Don would have been mad at Jim for making a promise that he didn’t keep. That Friday night at the Sydney Stadium, Jim told me that the title switch would definitely happen, and then added, “And they’re looking forward to getting you back in Oklahoma when I’m through with you.”

You know how sometimes people say something to you and it rubs you the wrong way? For some reason, Jim saying “when I’m through with you” rubbed me the wrong way. He probably didn’t mean anything by it, and I didn’t say anything, but it definitely stuck out to me. After I found Don, I explained the situation, telling him, “Jim wants to make you the World Heavyweight Champion. We just need your word...”

I don’t know why I said “we,” but as soon as I said it, Don shot me a look, and asked, “What, are you working in the office now?”

“No!” I exclaimed. “It’s just that Jim asked me to ask you, and that’s why I used the word ‘we.’”

I couldn’t believe it. What a day for misinterpretations and reading into things. There must have been something in the Sydney air. I assured Don that it was an innocent slip of the tongue, and that we were still a tight team, which of course was the truth. Don trusted me, and was genuinely excited to hear he was getting the World Title, which he promptly won from Spiros Arion in Sydney. Even though it was Jim Barnett’s version of the World Title, the Australian’s recognized it as the only World Heavyweight Title, and couldn’t have cared less about the NWA Title. You know how in America, if someone came to a territory with the

Australian Title or the Japanese Title, the fans wouldn't care? Well, it was the same thing in Australia.

True to Jim's word, he flew my wife over, and it was wonderful to have her with me. Jim also went out of his way to ensure she never got homesick, because anytime I was out of town, he would stop by and see her, take her out to lunch, and go shopping with her. And if he couldn't make it, his longtime secretary Lonnie Winters would visit with her. Jim was very thoughtful. My wife loved living in Australia, and lived the life of a movie star. We had a penthouse apartment at the Sheraton Hotel in Sydney that cost us \$50 a week. That was actually a lot of money in Australia, because the average wage was \$40 a week. Our penthouse was right across the street from Jim Barnett's, and it had a nice balcony with tables, chairs, and plenty of room to walk around and lay in the sun, overlooking Botany Bay and Sydney Harbor. Don even moved in with us. He figured that we already had a penthouse with an extra bedroom, so why should he have to pay rent somewhere else?

One day, Jim asked me to pick someone on the roster that I would feel comfortable wrestling against. He wanted to get me involved in a program of my own, but he made it very clear: He wanted me in the ring wrestling. I went home and wracked my brain. Who in the territory could I have a good feud with? Then it hit me: The announcer, Sam Menacker. Even though he was 60, he had been a wrestler and was still in good shape. He was a very classy guy, the people of Australia really loved and respected him, and I knew I could get some heat with him and draw some money. I ran it by Jim, who was intrigued, so he spoke to Karl and Sam about it. They were very excited by my idea, so at that point, my first program in Australia got the green light.

To get the feud off the ground, Jim told me to go on TV and start calling everyone "wogs," which is a derogatory word for foreigners in Australia. He wanted me to use the word in as many different ways as I could, so I called Spiros Arion a "Greek wog," and Mario Milano an "Italian wog." I basically referred to everyone as wogs, talked about how much I detested them, and stated that "Australia would be a much better place if all the wogs went home."

Of course, I completely ignored the fact that I was one, myself! Then, Jim had me go out to do an interview with Sam, and as soon as I mentioned the word "wog," Sam reprimanded me, saying, "You shouldn't be talking like that! You probably don't even understand what that word means."

I assured him I did, and then added, "You're just upset because you're married to a wog!"

Sam was married to a beautiful Hungarian woman, and everyone knew it, because he would always talk about her on TV. As soon as I called his wife a "wog," Sam slapped me and walked off the set. The following week, Sam was in the midst of apologizing for his actions when I stormed out and yelled, "You were scared to death of me last week! You slapped me and ran away! If you were a real man you would have stayed, but you're obviously afraid of me. I want to beat you up in front of your wog wife so badly that I'll let you wrestle me with one arm tied behind my back!"

Of course, Sam jumped at the chance, and we were off and running. The Australians had never seen me wrestle, and this was the brilliance of Jim Barnett: He booked me against a local Australian wrestler for a TV match, and told me not to sell anything, but to just go out there and demolish my opponent. I went out there and did a number on the guy and really humiliated him. Then I walked to Sam's announcing desk and screamed, "I hope your wog wife was watching!"

Sam came out of his chair with a stiff right hook and knocked me on my ass. The studio audience went crazy. Jim was smart enough to realize that in the fans eyes, I was "just a manager" and Sam was "an old guy," so we had to show them that not only was I a tough guy who could wrestle, but that Sam "still had it," and had a chance of beating me. Sam and I started our matches on the road, and Jim had set it up so well that we did phenomenal business. The one hand tied behind my back gimmick was my suggestion. If you recall, I did that with announcer Alan Ruby in Michigan and referee Dick Raines in Dallas, as well. Anytime I did something that turned out to be successful, I carried it with me throughout my career. Don Jardine used to say that my brain was like a computer, because I would put things in the back of my mind, and use them later when the right situation arose.

Jim also brought female wrestling to Australia, and one of the girls he brought was Evelyn Stevens, who coincidentally had been dating Don Jardine for about eight months. Evelyn arrived on a Wednesday afternoon and checked into the Koala Motel, which is where a lot of the working girls did their tricks with the men in town. That night, Don and Evelyn double dated with me and my wife. We went out to eat, and then saw a Tom Jones concert at the Silver Spade. After that, we stopped by the Texas Tavern to have a few drinks, and then went to the Koala Motel, because my wife had asked Evelyn to bring over certain things that she couldn't get in Australia, like brownie and cake mixes. The girls were both dressed up because we had gone out to a nice restaurant and a Tom Jones concert, and as we walked into the motel and started towards the elevator, the guy behind the desk yelled, "Hey! You can't take those whores upstairs!"

Don turned around and glared at him, asking, "What did you just say?"

The guy behind the desk glared right back and answered, "I said you can't take them whores upstairs!"

Don then told me to take the girls up in the elevator and wait in the room. I, in turn, told the girls to go up on their own, because I was concerned about what might transpire. I knew how Don could get. When the girls got on the elevator, Don leaped over the desk, hit the guy, knocked him against the wall, picked him up, threw him over the desk into the foyer, threw him through a plate glass window out onto a patio that had a big wishing well pond, and proceeded to stomp him in the chest and the stomach. Then, he lodged his head up against a brick wall, and I quickly grabbed the guy by his legs and pulled him back, because I knew that Don was going to boot him right in the head. I pulled him back to save him, but now his crotch was spread open. Don looked at me and grinned, "Good idea!"

He then kicked the guy right in the crotch, picked him up, and threw him in the pond. I was stunned, and said, “Don, get out of here right now and go back to the apartment. I’ll take care of the girls.”

Don took off in a flash, and the guy on the floor was messed up really bad. I called an ambulance and begged, “Please hurry, someone’s hurt very bad at the Koala Motel.”

When the police arrived, a witness told them that the attacker was with me, so the cops asked me who I was with. I put my best innocent face on, and replied, “To be honest, I don’t know him. I only know his name is Tex, and he’s here on R&R from Viet Nam. When the guy behind the desk said we couldn’t take whores upstairs, Tex flipped out on him.”

The police took my passport for four days, and took three statements from me, but never pursued it further. What Don did was brutal, but the guy behind the desk was a punk and got what was coming to him. While that story shows the viciousness of Don, it also shows what a loyal friend he could be. As a friend, Don in every way is a great guy, and would give you the shirt off his back. I’ve literally seen him give his wrestling boots to new young guys who couldn’t afford boots. He even gave Dusty Rhodes three ring outfits when he was starting out. What Don did that night at the Koala Motel was done out of respect for me, my wife, and his girlfriend. Don is a very special guy, but if you mess with him, there’s a heavy price to pay.

At one point during the tour, Mario Milano bought a house in Melbourne, and he had a housewarming party. All of the wrestlers went, and there was a local wrestler there who was clearly intoxicated, and he offered me a beer. When I told him that I wasn’t drinking that night, he got offended and replied, “Oh, so you’re too good to drink with me?”

He then turned to walk into Mario’s kitchen, and the next thing I knew he came back and hit me with a beer bottle in the back of my head. As soon as he did that, all of the guys snatched him up and threw him out of the house.

The previous two stories I just shared with you are the only two violent out-of-the-ring incidents I was involved in during my time in Australia. The reason I say that is because there is a rather bizarre story about me that was published in the autobiography of the notorious Australian criminal, Chopper Read. He claims that one evening he saw me manhandling a former Australian heavyweight boxing champion in a Sydney bar, so he snuck up behind me and hit me with a beer mug. Then, once I was knocked out, he stole my Rolex watch, wallet, ring, and gold chains. To boot, he says he ran into me three weeks later in Surfer’s Paradise and I actually recognized him. Needless to say, that’s a complete lie, and it never happened. First of all, if somebody had knocked me out and stolen my wallet in a bar – I think I would remember it. Also, I never wore a Rolex watch in my life - I wore Omega’s – and I never wore gold chains, either. And finally, how could I have recognized him three weeks after our alleged incident if he originally came at me from behind? I would, however, love to know who the champion boxer was that I was supposedly getting the better of that night.

Now, he very well may have snuck up behind someone, knocked them out, and stolen a wallet that belonged to Gary Hart. However, my wallet, passport, and identification were all

under my legal name – Gary Richard Williams – so whoever’s wallet he took it wasn’t mine! At that time, though, wrestlers in Australia were like movie stars - and I’m not being arrogant when I say that I was a celebrity of that era, because the celebrity factor in Australia on a national level was very small during that timeframe – so perhaps when he saw the “Gary Hart” name on the drivers license – he assumed it was me. So even though it’s a mythical story and he’s clearly in Fantasyland, Chopper Read has all the right in the world to claim he “beat me up” if he feels it makes him seem like more of a man. However, I guarantee you that if it really happened – and I don’t care how tough he is - he wouldn’t be able to walk around and talk about it today.

Anyhow, at the end of our tour, Jim said, “I have something for you and Don. Thanks for all of your hard work.”

He gave me two envelopes - one for Don, and one for me - each containing \$1,000. Jim gave out bonuses like that to those he felt he might have underpaid, but he also did it to thank us for the business that we brought in. That was a great thing for Jim to do, but that’s the kind of guy he was.

Then, Jim asked me if Don and I would consider staying in Australia to become regular members of his crew. I thanked him for the offer, but told him that Don had already made a deal to go to Japan, and there was no way he would miss that, because he was promised \$2,700 a week - almost four times what he was making in Australia. Jim understood, and then asked, “What about you?”

“Jim, as much as I would love to have this opportunity, I’ve already given my commitment to help secure Oklahoma for Bill Watts, and I don’t know how he would feel if I just skipped out on him, let alone Fritz Von Erich and Verne Gagne, who have a stake in its success, as well.”

Jim just waved that off, asking, “If I can talk to them and make sure everything is okay, will you stay here and become a regular member of my crew?”

“Of course,” I replied. “As long as Bill, Fritz, and Verne approve it.”

“They are my boys!” He laughed, “How could they say no to me after all of the money I made them?”

That was true. Jim Barnett had made all three of them a lot of money over the years. And Jim being Jim – he talked to Fritz, Verne, and Bill personally and worked everything out – thus making me a regular in Australia.



# Chapter 10: Madison Square Garden

One evening in Sydney, my wife and I had Jim over for dinner, and before he left, he asked if he could “talk a little business.” He told me he was considering bringing Ivan Koloff to Australia, and asked if I would fly to New York City and watch Ivan in person to see if he would work out and fit in Australia. While I wasn’t on Jim’s level, I had a good eye and knew how to spot talent, and Jim trusted my judgment. And even though Vince McMahon had assured Jim that Ivan was great, Jim was depending on me for the truth, because even if promoters were good friends - which Jim and Vince most definitely were - if they had a piece of talent that they wanted to get rid of, they would hype him up to no end. I was more than happy to take on this assignment from Jim, and knowing Vince’s penchant for big muscle-heads, Jim’s last words to me were, “I don’t want you bringing me back a Crusher Verdu.”

I went to New York City for the January 19, 1970 card at Madison Square Garden as a representative of Jim Barnett’s office. It was the first and only time I’ve ever been in New York City, and it was an all expenses paid trip. Jim Barnett paid the airfare, hotel, food, taxis – everything.

The WWWF staff knew I was coming to look at talent, and during the day of the show, I met with Vince McMahon, Arnold Skaaland, and Angelo Savoldi in their second floor office at the Holland Hotel on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street in Manhattan. We had a very nice time, and I remember being impressed by how genuinely kind Vince McMahon was.

That evening at the Garden, I noticed that there were a lot of old time wrestlers visiting backstage, and was surprised to see Vince go up to each and every one of them and give them a payoff. He even gave me a payoff of \$250 that night - and I was just there scouting talent! Vince was a great man, and even though he was clearly the King of New York, he treated me like royalty that night.

I saw a lot of familiar faces in the Garden dressing room – such as Waldo Von Erich, Mario Milano, and Bob Ellis - and met a lot of new ones, as well. There was a young wrestler hanging out in the dressing room that night - though he wasn’t wrestling – named Bepo Mongol. He would later change his ring name to Nikolai Volkoff. I also met Gorilla Monsoon for the first time that evening. He was a big, rugged guy, but at the same time, he was a complete gentleman. That’s also where I first met Buddy Roberts. He was there hanging out with Ivan Koloff, because they were really good friends.

Bruno Sammartino was headlining that night. I hadn’t seen Bruno since Detroit, so I went to him and said hello, but he was very cold to me. He never stood up, but instead just barely looked up, shook my hand, and muttered, “Hi. How are you?”

I didn’t think anything of it at the time, and figured he was just preparing for his match.

Ivan Koloff, Gorilla Monsoon, Buddy Roberts, Arnold Skaaland, and I went out for dinner after the show to an Italian restaurant in Brooklyn, and then we went to this club in

Manhattan where we drank, gambled, and played cards all night. I was extremely impressed with Ivan's in ring performance, so I spent that time getting to know him better, and telling him what Australia was like. He was an incredibly nice guy, and very respectful. He told me that he really wanted to go to Australia, but he had just gotten married and wasn't comfortable leaving his new wife for a few months.

I got back to the hotel in the early hours of the morning and called Jim in Sydney with my report. I told him, "I watched Ivan work, and the guy impressed the hell out of me I think he's a winner and worth every penny you'll spend on him.. However, he just got married two months ago and is leery of leaving his wife."

"Make a deal with him." Jim replied. "Offer him \$1,000 a week, and tell him not to worry, I'll bring his wife, too."

As I knew from experience, Jim wanted his wrestlers to be as comfortable as possible. If he was going to spend his time, money, and energy on someone, and was figuring them in to his inner circle, he wanted to make sure they were happy - and kept happy. When I saw Ivan the next day and told him the deal Jim was offering him, he was tickled to death. Ivan was one of the highest priced guys that Jim ever brought to Australia, but in Australia, you worked hard for your money.

# Chapter 11: The Eastern European Invitational

In Australia during this time were Mark Lewin and Curtis Iaukea, both of whom I would go on to have extremely special relationships with until this very day. I had known Mark since my days in Chicago, and we also worked together in Detroit. Mark was originally from Buffalo, and came from a wrestling family: His older brothers, Donn and Ted, had been in the business long before him, and their sister Sallee married wrestler Danny McShain, who is the one who actually broke Mark in back in 1953.

Curtis Iaukea was really special. He was more than just a wrestler - he was an attraction. Curtis would go on TV and make these fabulous speeches about “the scum of the earth” and how “the cesspools of sin need to be wiped clean.” It was truly classic stuff. Australia was where I first met him, and we became lifelong friends. To this day, he refers to me as the smartest guy he ever met. My response to that is that he obviously hasn’t met many people! He’s such a wonderful guy, and has many interests outside of wrestling – like music. Curtis loves The Grateful Dead so much that he moved to Berkley, California so he could see them on a regular basis! He used to go to the Fillmore West in San Francisco all the time, and has some wild stories about The Dead and what was going on in the bay area during 60’s.

Mark and his wife had a penthouse out on Bondai Beach, and Curtis and his wife had a penthouse in the same building my wife and I did. However, the difference in the Iaukea’s apartment and my apartment was that they did not have a balcony, so Curtis would have to come over and sun on ours. My wife and I regularly socialized with the Iaukea’s and the Lewin’s, and our wives would even spend time together while we were on tour. We all got along really well, and it was just a wonderful environment.

After getting back to Australia, Jim Barnett and I talked about different ways to promote Ivan, and we came up with the following idea: I would go on television and talk about the “Ivan Koloff Eastern European Invitational,” in which I would put up one thousand American dollars - so I could say that U.S. money is better than Australia’s - and Ivan’s Eastern European Heavyweight Title to whoever could beat Ivan. The catch was, to be in the “open invitational,” you had to be from Eastern Europe - which was a communist block. Since Ivan would be the only big-name wrestler in Australia billing himself from Eastern Europe, we could ensure Ivan would get over and stay over – and never have to wrestle the top guys in Australia for his title.

Fans were furious I was bringing in a communist, and when people started screaming at me for bringing in a “dirty Russian,” I knew we had something big on our hands. I built Ivan Koloff up so much that he was over before he arrived, but he was such a great wrestler and bump taker, and had a spectacular look because he was well into 300 pounds, that when he did come to Australia, he more than lived up to the fans expectations. Ivan’s wife wasn’t able to fly in with him, as there were some passport issues to take care of, so he stayed in the spare bedroom of our apartment where Don Jardine used to live until she could arrive. Ivan was really lonely without his wife, and he started to drink. He was a happy drunk, though. He was very jovial, and just

wanted to hug everyone. I would drink some wine and smoke a little pot, but was never the type of guy who got drunk, because it made me feel uncomfortable.

Jerry Brisco was also in Australia for a tour, and I knew him from Oklahoma. Jerry and I loved and adored Ivan, and we nicknamed him “the Gerber Baby.” That was our pet name for him. We would go into Ivan’s room late at night, sit on the floor, watch him sleep, and marvel at how he looked exactly like the Gerber Baby. It was great having Jerry Brisco in Australia, but his tour didn’t last too long. He was in the National Guard, and his unit was called up to go to Viet Nam. He had to go back to Oklahoma immediately, but Jim Barnett, Eddie Graham, and Jim Crockett pulled some strings with a couple of Congressmen and Senators, and he got out of going to Viet Nam. That was a crazy time. The draft was a major concern for a lot of the boys back then, but fate was on my side and my number never came up. I was registered at my mother’s address in Chicago, and would call and speak with her every now and then, but I was one of the lucky ones, because no draft notice ever came for me.

Rip Hawk and Swede Hanson also came in for a tour, and since they were big drinkers, they started hanging out with Ivan Koloff. I called my wife from Melbourne one Saturday, and we decided to have Rip, Swede, Ivan, and the Iaukea’s over for dinner that Thursday night. On Wednesday, after the matches in Brisbane, Rip, Swede, and Ivan went to a bar and drank all night. When I met them at the airport Thursday morning, they were drunk out of their minds. Thank God they were all happy drunks, hugging each other and singing songs. After finally getting Ivan on the plane, he decided that he needed a scotch. I asked him not to have any more drinks at that time, suggesting he wait until we got to Sydney. It was a five hour trip, so I hoped that by the time we arrived, Ivan would be sobered up for dinner. As soon as we landed, though, Ivan, Rip, and Swede all went off to the Texas Town Tavern to have a few drinks before our dinner party.

My wife cooked an American home-style dinner for all of us: Chicken fried steak, macaroni and cheese, scallop potatoes, and a green-bean casserole. Curtis’ wife, who was from New Zealand, made some New Zealand type fare, as well. The girls had been preparing this feast since Saturday, and they really made a lovely spread. Curtis and his wife arrived early, and around 8:00 p.m., in came Rip and Swede with Ivan’s arms draped over their shoulders.

They were all as drunk as skunks, and I knew that we had to get some food into them, so we all sat down and started eating. There was enough food on that table to feed ten armies, but between Curtis, Rip, Swede, Ivan, and myself - there was nary a morsel left. After dinner, I suggested that Ivan go into the spare bedroom and get some sleep, promising that when he woke up the next morning, my wife and I would have a nice breakfast waiting for him. Then, I told him, he could sit out on our patio, get some sun, and sweat everything he’s been drinking out of his system. After everyone left, and my wife and I had cleaned up, I opened Ivan’s door to check on him. That was around 1:30 a.m. One hour later, my wife got up, because she heard some noise coming from Ivan’s room, and wanted to go check on him. She did, but immediately returned to our bedroom declaring, “Ivan’s gone!”

The next day, I saw Ivan at the Sydney Stadium, and I asked him where he went last night. He told me that he met up with Rip and Swede at the Three Oats bar, and they all got

drunk again. So from Wednesday night after the show in Brisbane through Friday morning in Sydney, Rip and Swede continuously took Ivan out to maintain his drunkenness!

Just as Ivan's tour was winding down, Jim told me he had some "big news" to share with me. I figured it would be something juicy, because Jim loved gossip, and always had the best, most inside gossip. And Jim's gossip was never second or third generation gossip - his was fresh right off the press!

Jim told me that Ivan was eventually going to win the WWWF Title from Bruno Sammartino, and that he was working out a deal where I would go to New York with Ivan and manage him during his title run. Then, after Ivan dropped the belt to Pedro Morales, we would return to Australia and get some mileage out of being "the duo that beat Bruno." Needless to say, I was very excited for my big run in New York.

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## **Chapter 12: My Big Run in New York**

## **Chapter 13: The Bruno Situation**

Well, as you can see from the previous chapter, I never did get my big run in New York. It would have been great and profitable for everyone concerned, and both Jim Barnett and I would have loved for it to have happened, but it was just not meant to be. Dressing room politics prevented it from ever having a chance.

Apparently, Pete Sanchez, an undercard wrestler in the WWWF, was in Amarillo when I was there, and he told Bruno Sammartino that I said “derogatory things” about him. When I first heard this I was shocked. I never would have done anything like that, and wasn’t the kind of guy who bad-mouthed other wrestlers. Besides, I always had the greatest respect for Bruno - and still do. I could see myself making an off-handed remark, where if someone said that Bruno Sammartino was the World Champion, I would add, “No, Bruno is the WWWF Champion, not the World Champion.”

I may have said something like that, but apparently what Bruno ended up hearing was a lot more. If you really think about it, when Pete was with me in Amarillo, I was a 24 year old kid wrestling as “Gay” Gary Hart. Why would Bruno even care about what I said? It wasn’t like I was Buddy Rogers, Killer Kowalski, or Johnny Valentine!

I spoke to my old buddy Jim Myers, aka George “The Animal” Steele, and he confirmed Bruno’s anger at me. He even told me had tried to get me into the WWWF on a couple of occasions, but each time Bruno put the kibosh on it, saying he didn’t want me around. Jim finally asked Bruno what his big problem was with me, and when Bruno told him what Pete said, Jim tried rationalizing with him, using the old, “Don’t believe everything people tell you” line. It didn’t matter. Bruno was convinced I was the devil, and Captain Lou Albano was tapped to manage Ivan for his WWWF Title run.

At least I knew why Bruno was so cold to me in Madison Square Garden that night. I would have loved to have had a run there, but because of a locker room politician filling Bruno’s ears with a bunch of lies, “Playboy” Gary Hart was unacceptable to Bruno Sammartino.

# Chapter 14: Trouble In Paradise

Since things didn't work out with the WWF, Jim Barnett asked me to manage Bulldog Brower and Brute Bernard. I was more than happy to do that, but I also wanted to bring The Spoiler back, so after his tour of Japan ended, I called him to see when he would like to return to Australia. He said he would only come if Jim would pay for his girlfriend, Evelyn Stevens, to come, as well. I told him I wasn't sure if Jim would pay for Evelyn's flight, but Don pointed out that he had done it for my wife in the past. I explained that this was completely different for two reasons: Evelyn was his girlfriend - not his wife, and perhaps more importantly, Jim had offered to pay for my wife's flight - it wasn't a demand on my part. Don insisted I ask Jim, though, so I did. When I let Jim know Don's condition for returning to Australia, Jim thought about it for a few seconds, and then said, "Well, I don't like people making demands on me. Besides, I think you've got your hands full with Brute and the Bulldog."

Letting Don know that Jim Barnett rejected his demand was a tough phone call for me to make, and it was unfortunate that we had to break up our successful team and go in different directions, but I knew in my heart that we would be back together one day. Creating The Spoiler was the defining moment of my success in wrestling, and Don Jardine is more important in my career than anyone I know. He's the one who made it possible for me to go to Australia, and for other guys wanting to work with me. Plus, thanks to him, promoters began to listen to my ideas and ask my opinion. Don stood with me, made me strong, and helped me become very successful in the wrestling business. He's a great guy, was instrumental in my career in so many ways, and is probably my favorite of all the guys that I ever managed.

During this time, Lord Athol Layton came in to replace announcer Sam Menacker, who had left Australia to promote in El Paso. Layton was originally from Australia, so his return was quite a big deal. If you recall, I had worked with Lord Layton in Detroit, and he treated me like a second class citizen and a street punk because I worked for Bert Ruby. And sure enough, as soon as he came into Australia, I started having problems with him once again.

During his commentary he would belittle me by calling me a "leech," and say that I'm a guy who "makes his living off of other people." Everything that he had to say about me was derogatory - but not in a manner that was intended to get heat or make me a villainous heel. How is an announcer calling me an "uneducated Chicago thug" good for business? He was shooting on the square. He thought I was a thug and didn't deserve to be in the same studio as him.

Jim Barnett and I were talking one day, and he started reminiscing about what great business I had done with Sam Menacker. I had a hunch where this was going, so I wasn't too surprised when he segued into, "How would you feel about getting into a program with Lord Athol Layton?"

I was so appreciative of all of the good things that Jim had done for me that I didn't even hesitate, and told him I would be happy to do it. Jim was thrilled, and set up our first match for Brisbane. The night of my first match with Athol, we got in the ring and I chopped him, punched him, and kicked him. Lord Athol didn't sell a thing. Not only did he not sell, but he didn't

register, and he didn't even blink. All he wanted to do was kick me and give me a neck chop. He liked to do that. He would put my head over his knee face down and chop me in the back of the neck. What a phony bunch of junk that was. I went three minutes with him, and finally whispered, "Throw me to the ropes, hit me with a chop, and cover me."

He did just that, and the crowd went nuts. We went to Sydney on Friday, and it was the same thing: I punched him, hit him, and even raked his eyes. He sold nothing. Saturday, we went to Melbourne, and it was the same scenario. Sunday night in Perth, we were in the Olympic Stadium, and there were over 22,000 people in attendance. I was waiting in the ring...and waiting...and waiting...and waiting...then all of a sudden, out walked his highness Lord Athol Layton. With his hair combed back, all tanned, and in a long white robe – he looked like a Greek God. People were handing him bouquets of flowers, cheering, and going crazy. It was like the return of the prodigal son, and you would have thought The Beatles had just entered the building. Even the Prime Minister, John Gorton, was there, jumping up and down like a star-struck fan! All of this is for a 50 year old announcer!

As he entered the ring, I was looking right at him, but he ignored me like he had no time for me. We had the exact same match that we had been having all week. I did everything I could to him, and he didn't sell anything. He got his neck chop in, threw me to the ropes, chopped me, and I went down. However, this time he didn't cover me. He put his foot on my chest and raised his arms like he had just slain a beast in a Roman Coliseum. After the referee counted to three, "his Lordship" walked towards the audience with his hands raised up. I was incensed, and at that moment, for some odd reason, I thought back to Lou Thesz, and how kind he was to me when he came to Dallas. I asked myself what Lou would do in a situation like this, and then jumped up, spun Athol around, hit him with everything I had, and knocked him flat on his ass. I slid out under the bottom rope and calmly walked back to the dressing room. As I was walking, Jim Barnett was running towards the ring - and his coattails were flying. As he passed me, he screamed, "What would make you do something like that to such a nice man?!"

I knew that if I said anything back to him he would have fired me on the spot, so I just kept walking. When I got to the dressing room, all the boys were there to greet me and congratulate me. Eventually, Mark Lewin – who was the booker - told me that Jim wanted to see me, so we walked over to where Jim was. Jim was so angry he wouldn't make eye contact with me, and looking at Mark, asked, "What should I do with Gary?"

Mark didn't miss a beat, and replied, "Well, if I were you, I would give him a \$300 a week raise, make him part of the \$1,000 club, and fire that guy who calls himself 'Lord Athol Layton.'"

Jim pretended he didn't just hear that, looked at me, and sternly said, "Gary, I should fire you this minute. You have one more match with Athol coming up - and if you do that to him again, not only will I fire you, but I will make sure you never work anywhere in America again."

"You're paying for my body, not my soul," I said. "Do whatever you have to do."



At that point, I calmly turned and walked away, thanking God I didn't raise my voice at Jim Barnett. I didn't hear anything until about 4:00 p.m. on Tuesday, when Jim unexpectedly showed up at my apartment wanting to talk. We went out on the patio, and he said, "Gary, you've really hurt Athol. He's an old man and you ought to be ashamed of yourself. However, I've talked with Mark, and he told me that a lot of people don't like him, so you're not the only one who feels this way towards him. However, I want you to give me your word that you will wrestle him one last time before he goes away, and that there will be no more nonsense. If you promise me that, I will make you a member of the \$1,000 club."

Needless to say, I didn't hesitate for a second, and told him, "Jim, you've got yourself a deal."

The \$1,000 club had Mark Lewin, Karl Kox, Curtis Iaukea, Spiros Arion, and Mario Milano. Ivan had been in the club, but he left. Since I first arrived in Australia, I had been getting \$700 a week with bonuses - \$500 here and there, and he would fly my wife to Melbourne every now and then. At that moment I became one of Jim's boys, or as he called us, "My stars."

It was really hard to break into that club. Very few people succeeded in Australia to begin with. Guys like Jody Hamilton, Rip Hawk, Swede Hanson, and Jack Brisco were all super, great talents who, for whatever reason, just couldn't make it over there. Australia was a very special place, but it was also very demanding. You had to be at one-hundred percent 24/7. Jim would not allow any laziness. For those of us in the \$1,000 club, Jim paid us well, made our lives wonderful, took very good care of us, and treated us like a million bucks - but believe me, we earned it.

I gladly did the job for Athol in our final match, but at least that time, he covered me. And even though he was elderly, he deserved what I did to him in Perth. I know it's wrong, but I just couldn't allow someone to treat me like that.

Jim Barnett was a genius when it came to getting talent over. Bulldog Brower was a really powerful guy, and Jim wanted him to make a big impact in Australia. Haystack Calhoun was also in for a tour, and his stipulation was that you had to body-slam him to beat him. Of course, everybody would try, but they would inevitably fall back, and he would land on top of them and pin them. In order to get the Bulldog over, Jim Barnett booked him against Haystack for a televised match, and gimmicked the corner of the ring so it would collapse when he slammed Calhoun. The day of the taping, Jim was panic-stricken that someone would accidentally wrestle in the gimmicked corner before the angle could happen - and fall through the ring. He made it clear that he didn't want to see anyone in that corner, and during the entire taping, he stood right off camera making sure that everyone followed his edict. When Jim gave me the go-ahead, I brought Bulldog Brower out to the ring and called Haystack "a big tub of lard" and "a disgrace to the wrestling business." Bulldog Brower was 320 pounds of solid muscle, and in those days he was popping Dianabol by the handful, so he had a twitch going, and his eyes were bulging out something fierce. I challenged Haystack Calhoun to come out, proclaiming, "Bulldog Brower will not only body slam Haystack Calhoun, but he will slam him right through the ring!"

Haystack came out to the ring to accept the challenge, and they started wrestling. About three minutes into their match, I jumped up on the ring apron and ordered the Bulldog to “Slam that fat piece of shit!”

Bulldog picked up Haystack, turned him, and slammed him in the gimmicked corner, just as Jim wanted. The ring broke, and the fans at home could only see Haystack’s head and feet sticking out.

Jim had wanted us to do the angle ten minutes before the show ended, and we kept insisting that we should do it at the very end of the show. Jim just rolled his eyes and snapped, “Who’s running this ship? I want ten minutes left in the show!”

We didn’t have the vision that Jim Barnett had. We only saw the finish, but he saw the big picture, and had already played the whole thing out in his mind. The way Jim booked it, the announcer – John Little - could do nothing but stand there for the last ten minutes of the show, selling the angle and the incredible strength of Bulldog Brower. Because of that, Bulldog got over big-time in Australia - all thanks to the genius of Jim Barnett.

Meanwhile, I got in trouble for saying “shit” on TV, because they didn’t have the ability to censor it off the show back then. I played dumb, and sheepishly told Jim, “I’m sorry. I didn’t know shit was a bad word in Australia.”

In Australia, “bloody” is considered a bad word, so I was really reaching, but Jim saved my job for me.

Tag team wrestling had never really caught on in Australia, and Jim was always trying to find the right team to capture the people’s attention. While there had been tag team matches, they were mainly out of programs or angles, and Jim really wanted to bring in a well-known team of stature. He brought in Jody Hamilton and Tom Renesto as The Assassins, but they didn’t work out, so I suggested The Texas Outlaws: Dick Murdoch and Dusty Rhodes. If you recall, I had originally wanted to bring them into Oklahoma and manage them when I was assisting Bill Watts in the booking office, but my run in Australia waylaid that plan. The Outlaws had just had solid runs in Detroit, Florida, and Dallas, and I really thought they would get over in Australia, so Jim took my advice and flew them in. The Texas Outlaws got over with the Australian fans pretty quickly, and Jim fell in love with Dusty immediately. He even told me that he thought Dusty was the greatest thing since Dick the Bruiser! Unfortunately, the rebelliousness that made The Outlaws such a great team was also their downfall in Australia.

Jim Barnett had a dress code for his crew, and demanded we all wear slacks, a dress shirt, a tie, and a jacket. We were never allowed to be seen in jeans and T-shirts in public, and if anyone showed up in one of his towns slovenly dressed, they would be on the first plane home. Jim had rules, and if you were going to work for him, he would pay you good and take care of you, but he wanted you to be presentable, look respectable, and give one-hundred percent every night. However, for Dusty and Dick, he bent the rules a bit. They were The Outlaws, after all. He let them wear nice jeans and cowboy boots, but Jim insisted they wear those little cowboy ties on their shirts. Dusty and Dick carried the ties in their pockets, and whenever they would see Jim

coming, they would quickly put them on. Dick and Dusty also loved to go to the Texas Tavern bar, which was a very popular hangout, and get all the Viet Nam soldiers out on R&R drunk. They would take safety pins, squeeze them on their own heads, and hang their socks off it! Dick Murdoch also did some crazy things. There was a guy in a town called Surfer's Paradise who had an aquarium, and Dick Murdoch would get in the tank and swim with the sharks and stingrays – and I don't mind admitting to you that I didn't have the balls to do that. And for some odd reason, Dusty and Dick were really big on wearing cut-off T-shirts and these ridiculously short jeans cut to look like Daisy Dukes. They would dress up like that and go hang out on the corner of the King's Cross. One time, I was in a restaurant eating with my wife when I saw them dressed like that, and I ran out screaming, "If Jim Barnett sees you, you'll be on the next plane home! You cannot walk around in public like that! You've got to clean up!"

They didn't pay any heed to my warning, though, and the very next day they were back in the Kings Cross with their cut-off shirts and cut-off jeans eating ice cream and talking to a bunch of street walkers. As if on cue, none other than Jim Barnett himself walked by. Of course, the next time I saw Jim, he told me, "I sent The Outlaws home. They'll have to learn their lesson another time."

Once every year, Jim booked his crew on tour of Asia, because the show out of Melbourne aired throughout the Far East. We actually started the tour in New Zealand, working Auckland, Wellington, and Christ Church, before flying to Indonesia, where we had shows in Jakarta, Bali, and Kuala Lumpur, and then finishing up in Singapore and Hong Kong. In all of those cities, we wrestled in soccer stadiums that could hold sixty-thousand people, and Jim would get no less than forty-thousand in every time.

When we got to Hong Kong, there was an English Colonel –Colonel Hunt - who was overseeing the province where we were having our matches. He came in to meet with us before the show, in order to let us know what we could and could not do. He looked like he just stepped out of a Gunga-Din movie. He had a white pit hat, a white shirt, white short pants, long white socks, and a crop-stick under his arm. It was raining, the fields were muddy, and while everyone had mud all over them, he had none. I don't know how he did it. Anyways, he was a high ranking officer, and had the authority to take our passports and throw us all in jail if he so desired. He was nobody to mess with, and when he was finished with his stern lecture, he turned his back to leave, and Karl Kox got up and mooned him. We all had to suppress our laughter, and you should have seen the look on Jim Barnett's face. Before the Colonel could turn around and see Karl's full-moon, Jim took Colonel Hunt by the arm and gently led him out of the room. You would think Jim would be furious at what Karl did, but he thought it was hilarious, and laughed about it for years to come. Every now and then, when we were together, Jim would start chuckling and say, "Remember when Karl gave Colonel Hunt the moon?"

We would then start howling with laughter.

As I mentioned, it was raining that night in Hong Kong, and we had to walk fifty yards in the mud to get to the ring. Jim got some plastic bags and before we went out for our matches, we all put our feet up and Jim ran around putting plastic bags over our boots so the ring wouldn't be muddy. It was quite a scene - no different than watching a concerned mother lacing up her little

boy's shoes. I even remember thinking that it was as if we were his son's, and that there was something adorable about the way he was treating us that day. I also think that says a lot about Jim, and how he didn't feel he was "above" doing something like that. Out of respect for Jim, we all dutifully wore the bags over our boots, and took them off just before we got into the ring. We were doing our best to keep the ring mat clean, but after some of the guys went in and out of the ring during their matches, the ring got muddy anyhow, and the baggies suddenly seemed all for naught.

One night in Melbourne, I was managing Brute Bernard in a match against Mark Lewin. At one point during their match, I was standing on the floor holding Mark, when Brute threw a kick, missed Mark, and hit me right between the eyes. As soon as it happened, I wasn't knocked out, but I was severely stunned. I whispered to Mark that I was hurt, so he and Brute quickly went for the finish, and I was so out of it that Brute had to help me up the aisle. Once I got to the dressing room, my face started to swell and discolor, and my right eye was swollen shut within twenty minutes. It turned out that my nose was cracked right down the middle, and both of my cheek bones were broken. The next day, I had real severe pink and purple bruising on my cheeks, two nasty looking black eyes, and blood spots in my eyeballs. I was so horrific looking that there was no way I could do the TV. I looked too gross, so they sent me back to Sydney, and I was off until the following Friday. By then, I looked better to those who had seen me in Melbourne, but to those who hadn't - I was gruesome looking. When Jim saw me he was aghast, and insisted, "You need to take more time off!"

"Why don't we take advantage of this, and say that Mark Lewin did it to me?" I proposed. "That way, I can exact my revenge!"

Jim liked my suggestion, and challenged me to come up with something good. He even said, "Make it something that people will remember, but don't tell me what it is. I want to be as surprised as the fans when I see it on TV."

Mark Lewin was a mentor to me in the psychology aspect of wrestling, so the two of us sat down and really wanted to come up with something big. Remember that hellacious thing I saw Sam Casino do with the coat hanger? I did it with Fritz Von Erich in the Sportatorium and it worked great, so I ran it by Mark, he agreed to do it, and we set it up where I would attack him in the ring at the next TV taping.

As Mark was on his television match putting his opponent out with the sleeper-hold, I rolled under the bottom rope with a coat hanger, put it over his head, jerked him down, twisted it, and dragged him into the corner. Meanwhile, he slipped an Alka-Seltzer in his mouth while I propped him up in the corner and tied his neck to the turnbuckle with the coat hanger. He was hanging there with his arms draped over the top ropes and his legs open, and he looked like Jesus being crucified on the cross with foam coming out of his mouth. I stood in front of him, pointing to my face screaming, "Look at my face! Look what you did to my face!"

Jim wasn't at TV when we taped it, but he saw it from his home in Sydney on Sunday afternoon. When I spoke with him after it aired, he told me it was "a bit over the top," but he didn't think it was so bad that we would get any backlash from it. The next day, Jim called me

and told me that we had a big problem. The President of the network, Sir Frank Packer, called him and said that he didn't want "Playboy" Gary Hart on his network anymore. Jim tried to explain that I was one of his mainstays and how important I was to his operation, but Frank said that none of that mattered because I wasn't allowed on his network. I asked Jim point blank, "So did I go too far?"

"You probably did," he replied. "But I told you to come up with something that people would remember, and you more than delivered."

Even though Mark and I were both involved in the angle, I was the one banned from TV because I was the perpetrator, while Mark was the victim. Frank Packer wasn't smart to wrestling, and he really thought that I viciously attacked Mark Lewin on his network. And there was no way that Jim would have told him that wrestling was a work – even to keep me on his crew. Since I couldn't appear on television anymore, I knew my time in Australia was over, and simply finished up all my non-televised dates and stayed off the TV.

I called Rip Hawk in the Carolinas and told him of my situation. Before Rip had left Australia, he mentioned that I could have a spot in the Carolinas as his and Swede Hanson's manager if I ever wanted it. Rip was one of the right hand men to Mid-Atlantic promoter Jim Crockett, so his assurance actually meant something. Rip was thrilled to hear from me, and told me I could start as soon as I wanted. Knowing I had my next job lined up, and still recovering from my injury, my wife and I gave up our Sydney penthouse and went vacationing at the Sheraton in Hong Kong. Then, we flew to Hawaii to meet up with the Iaukea's and the Lewin's. Curtis had a place in Maui, and Mark had one in Honolulu, so we all spent some time together in the sun, toasting to the end of my run in Australia, and perhaps more importantly, to our tremendous friendships.

## Chapter 15: The Carolinas

My wife and I arrived in Charlotte in early 1971, and we got a house near Rip Hawk. Rip and his wife were really good to us. They both went out of their way to make us feel at home and comfortable in Charlotte, and Rip's wife would go see my wife and spend time with her while I was on the road.

My first appearance in the Carolinas was in the Greensboro Coliseum - during Rip Hawk and Swede Hanson's match against Paul Jones and Nelson Royal for the Atlantic Coast Tag Team Title. For the finish, I rolled under the bottom rope while the referee's back was turned, and pile drove Paul so Rip and Swede could win the match.

In addition to managing the tag team champions, I was booked into a singles program with Jerry Brisco, where we went around in a series of Indian Strap Matches. He whipped me all throughout the Carolinas with that strap, and the fans loved every second of it. Jerry and I were actually good buddies, and we hung out a lot - though never in public. Since we couldn't be seen together, he would come over to my place, and when we were on the road, we would hang out in each others hotel rooms.

I also got into a singles program with Thunderbolt Patterson. Remember how in Dallas I had to lobby to feud with Tiger Conway because whites and blacks didn't generally wrestle each other? It was a similar situation in the Carolinas, and the other guys on the roster weren't exactly lining up to work with Thunderbolt. The Missouri Mauler, Brute Bernard, Rock Hunter, and Ole and Gene Anderson flat out refused to go out there and "get all sweaty" with Thunderbolt, and since I don't have a prejudiced bone in my body, I was more than happy to do it. Thunderbolt and I even had a boxing match in Raleigh, North Carolina, with Joe Louis as the referee. We sold the building out, and even though the house only brought in \$15,000, Mr. Crockett was so generous that he paid me and Thunderbolt \$1,000 each.

At one point, Ole Anderson left for Florida, so the search was on to find Gene Anderson a new tag team partner. Since Rip Hawk and Swede Hanson were going to be involved in a program with Gene and his new partner, Rip, Swede, and I were invited to the meeting to meet Gene's potential new partner. The three of us showed up and sat down with Jim Crockett, his booker Johnny Weaver, and Gene Anderson. At that point, Art Nelson - who I hadn't seen since my days in Amarillo - walked in, and as soon as he saw me, began sweating profusely. As I detailed earlier, Art wasn't thrilled to be my tag team partner in Amarillo, and ended up being really mean to me. I guess when he saw me sitting in on the meeting, he thought I was going to prevent him from getting this plum position because of the way he treated me in the past, but I never did things like that. When Mr. Crockett asked Rip, Swede, and I what we thought about putting Art with Gene, I was the first one to speak up, saying, "I think it would be great! I used to work with him - now I can work against him!"

As soon as I said that, Art mellowed right out, and stopped his sweating. Later, he told me he was sorry for the way he treated me, but I never held what happened in the past against him. Besides, I could understand - I wouldn't have wanted to be "Gay" Gary Hart's tag team

partner, either! Ironically, Art Nelson ended up becoming one of my best buddies in wrestling, and we even got into a singles program together, where we had a few boxing matches against each other throughout the Carolinas. Years later, after he retired from wrestling, he went to Las Vegas and got a job as a security guard at the Mint Hotel. My wife's two aunts would take the shuttle out to Las Vegas every eight weeks, and Art would always show them a lot of respect, take good care of them, check them in and out, make sure everything was okay, and tell them what a great guy I was. So what started out as a shaky relationship between us – over the years - developed into a real fondness for one another.

Trips in the Carolinas tended to be long, and I mostly traveled with Rip Hawk and Swede Hanson. Rip and Swede would have no problem downing a half gallon of Crown Royal as they careened down the highway, but whenever I filled up my corn cob pipe with marijuana, they looked at me as if I was some kind of evil, deranged freak. Meanwhile, these guys were driving 90 mph drunk! Pot smoking was seriously frowned upon in the south in 1971, though. One night, after the matches in Greensboro, I offered to drive Frank Morrell to his hotel in Charlotte. It was 2:00 a.m. when we got there, and the town was asleep. As I pulled into the hotel parking lot, he and I lit up a number and spent about fifteen minutes chatting in my car. We finished the joint, and I went home. The following morning, Rip Hawk called me at home and told me that Mr. Crockett wanted to see me in his office at noon. When I asked him what time we should meet up to go to Mr. Crockett's office, Rip told me that Mr. Crockett wanted to see me alone.

That was odd. I had met with Mr. Crockett four times at that point - but always with Rip and Swede. Then, it hit me that my meeting might have something to do with my recent no-selling for George Becker. George had been Jim Crockett's booker for many years, and Mr. Crockett was very fond of him. I had recently been put in a series of matches against him, but at the time, he was 60 years old, weighed 185 pounds, and had a pot belly. Even though I had wrestled older guys like Sam Menacker and Lord Athold Layton, they still looked healthy and strong, and my selling for them was believable. George, meanwhile, looked like a frail, little old man.

Jim Crockett ran the Mid-Atlantic territory. He was a great guy, both in heart and in stature, easily tipping the scales at five-hundred pounds. One of his favorite foods was fried pies. I could be talking to him about the main event in his most important town, but if someone came in with a fried pie, he would chase me out of his office. That's the kind of guy he was, so all his stooges would sneak in fried pies for him to eat. At noon, I went to Mr. Crockett's office, and it was just him and I. As soon as I sat down, he said, "I heard you were smoking dope in a hotel parking lot last night with Frank Morrell."

To say the least, I was taken aback, and asked him where he heard that. To his credit, he didn't play any "I'm not telling" games.

"Bunk Harris saw you guys out of his hotel window, so don't try to deny it," he said. "It was you and Frank Morrell, and you were in that little red Porsche of yours."

What could I say? He was right.

“If you’re going to smoke that stuff here, do it at your house,” he continued. “This is your only warning, and if I hear that you’re out and about doing it again, you’re out of here.”

Then, just as I expected, he brought up my no-selling for George Becker, and asked why I was doing that. I plead my case, saying, “I’m 6’4” and 255 pounds, and he’s 5’9” and looks like a little old man with a pot belly.”

Mr. Crockett just sighed and said, “You know that and I know that, but the fans don’t. They only know that when he hits you, you don’t fall down.”

I got the point, and assured him, “Mr. Crockett, from now on I will fall down if George even looks at me!”

Mr. Crockett gave me a big smile, and we ended the meeting on a positive note.

During the spring of 1972, I started to hear rumblings that Jim Barnett was selling his promotion in Australia, so I picked up the phone and called Jim in Sydney. I asked him about the rumors, and he confirmed them, explaining that it was getting difficult to do big business after the Australian dollar was devalued by more than a third. Plus, he was extremely homesick for America. He then told me that he had smoothed things over with Sir Frank Packer, the President of the network, and would like to bring me back for his last tour of Australia. I was completely honored, and jumped at the chance. Jim told me he was going to bring back all of his “stars” for the last three months of 1972, during which time he would also bring in the guys that new owners wanted to introduce. The new owners were the father and son team of Roy Welch and Buddy Fuller from Tennessee, and Jim told me that he expected his crew to put over their talent so that they could have a fair chance of success. I didn’t care what Jim’s conditions were - there was no way that I was going to miss the farewell tour in Australia.

I let Jim Crockett know I would be finishing up in September, thanked him for all the success and good times I had in the Carolinas, and assured him that if there was anything I could do for him on the way out, I would. He decided to send me out in style, and booked me in loser-leave-town matches with Jerry Brisco in every city in the Carolinas. Needless to say, I was more than happy to do the job in each and every match.

On the day I was leaving Charlotte, Jim Crockett asked me to stop by his office because he wanted to talk to me. When I got there, he said, “Some of my friends are buying into Australia, and they’re worried that the transition won’t go smoothly. I’m hoping that you will be as cooperative as you can, and that you’ll do whatever they ask of you on your way out. Can I tell my friends that they can count on you?”

“Of course you can, Mr. Crockett,” I earnestly replied. “Anything I can do in any way, I’m happy to do it.”

I was sincere. Mr. Crockett had treated me wonderfully, and made me a lot of money. Mr. Crockett was very happy to hear me say that, and assured me, “Anytime you want to come back here, I answer this phone. You just call and you’ve got an open door.”



## Chapter 16: Stopover in Dallas

During my run in the Carolinas, I became good friends with The Missouri Mauler. He was in a successful tag team with Brute Bernard, but Brute was leaving to Australia with me in January, leaving The Mauler without a partner. I thought that with me as their manager, they would get over big-time in Dallas.

I had been away from that territory for a while, but I knew that I could go back there at any time. I called Fritz and told him that I was finishing up in the Carolinas and preparing to go to Australia with Brute Bernard for the remainder of 1972, and asked if it would be alright if I brought Brute into Dallas in January, 1973. Fritz was extremely happy about that, because both he and his wife loved Brute Bernard. Then, I told him that I also wanted to bring The Missouri Mauler in. Unfortunately, Fritz wasn't as thrilled to hear that, and told me they had heat with each other over something that happened in St. Louis many years ago. I assured Fritz, "Mauler is a good guy, and he told me to tell you that he's game for anything you want to do. If I could, I would like to bring The Missouri Mauler in so that I can introduce him on TV before I leave for Australia."

Fritz agreed to that, and we made a deal. As soon as I arrived in Dallas, Fritz asked me to come to his office for a meeting. Lo and behold, sitting in his office was Buddy Fuller, who, along with his father Roy Welch, was buying the Australian territory from Jim Barnett. The moment I sat down, Fritz started giving me orders in front of Buddy that I was to "behave" myself in Australia, and "cooperate in every way" when the new talent was being introduced - which I had already intended to.

Clearly, everyone was getting paranoid that guys like Curtis Iaukea, Mark Lewin, and I would refuse to put the Tennessee talent over on our way out of Australia. I placated Fritz and assured both him and Buddy that I would do everything in my power to make it a smooth transition for the Tennessee group - but I also made it clear that I couldn't guarantee what guys like Curtis and Mark would do.

I had already talked to Mr. Crockett about this, and he told me he was going to tell Roy Welch and Buddy Fuller about my assurances, so I resented what Fritz was doing. It was like he was showing off for Buddy that I was "under his thumb" and would do whatever he told me. That's just the way Fritz was, though, and shows the difference between him and the other promoters. Mr. Crockett was classy enough to speak with me privately, and didn't feel the need to showboat in front of his friends.

The Missouri Mauler was going to make his debut by wrestling Billy Red Lyons at the Sportatorium. To explain why I was managing The Mauler that night - but would suddenly be gone for six months - I had to do something to get suspended. So during their match, I attacked Bronko Lubitch - the referee - and for that, I was "suspended" from Texas.

# Chapter 17: The Farewell Tour

In Australia, it truly was a farewell tour. Jim Barnett had the territory for eight years, and for his farewell tour he brought in the guys who he felt had the biggest impact over that time: Curtis Iaukea, Mark Lewin, Mario Milano, and Spiros Arion as the main babyfaces, and Bulldog Brower, Brute Bernard, and myself as the lead heels.

Unfortunately, the penthouse apartment my wife and I had previously stayed in wasn't available, but Curtis had a place at the Casa Del Sol, and he told me that there was an apartment available there if I wanted it. It was a beautiful apartment on the seventh floor with a real nice balcony, where I could see the Harbor Bridge and the Opera House, but remember how Curtis didn't have a balcony during my previous stay in Australia, and he had to use mine? Well, karma works in mysterious ways. At the Casa Del Sol, Curtis was on the floor above me, and his patio looked down on mine. He loved walking out on his patio every morning, proudly declaring how "clean" and "pure" the air was up on the eighth floor. He would then loudly be in awe of his view and how far he could see, marveling, "I can actually see Katmandu!"

Then, he would peek over his balcony, and I would be down on my patio laughing, of course. Invariably, he would ask me how the "peasants" were doing today. He loved doing that, and he had a great sense of humor.

Jim Barnett let the news out to the media that he had sold the territory, and that this would be the last tour of "Jim Barnett's stars" in Australia. That was a brilliant marketing move on his part, and he told us, "Let's burn this place down and get all the money we can!"

We had cage matches, death matches, and first blood matches. We did everything we could think of. Did we hot shot the territory? You better believe it. One night, Jim even had me hanging over the ring in a straight jacket off a hook! He wanted to get as much as he could before he was gone - and we lit that place up.

During the tour, Bulldog Brower got a call from his wife back in Toronto. She told him she found someone else and was leaving him. She actually ran off with the guy who built their house, so while Bulldog was in Australia paying for it, she fell in love with the guy who built it. I was trying to calm him down, but he was a wild man. Thankfully, Curtis Iaukea came over, cut a big piece of hash the size of a Hershey's chocolate, and we had the Bulldog eat it. In about two hours, he was really mellow and happy. Since the Bulldog had to leave the tour and take care of his personal problems, Jim asked Karl Steiger to accompany him from Sydney to Toronto - because he didn't want Bulldog traveling alone. Before we put the Bulldog on the plane, I gave Karl a piece of hash the size of my thumb, and instructed him, "About six hours outside of Toronto, slip this to him."

In November, the Tennessee crew started coming in. If you recall, Jim Barnett, Jim Crockett, and Fritz Von Erich were all very concerned that we wouldn't put the Tennessee talent over. That's because "Tennessee" was a bad word in wrestling due to the sub par talent and tasteless angles that territory was known for. It got to a point where anything with the word

“Tennessee” in it had a very bad connotation, and if wrestlers didn’t like an idea or a worker, it would be dismissed with, “That’s too much like Tennessee.” Throughout different territories in the states, it really wasn’t uncommon to hear things like, “That’s a Tennessee finish,” “He’s a Tennessee worker,” or, “What a Tennessee idea!”

As soon as the Tennessee workers started integrating themselves on our cards, it was obvious that this wasn’t going to work - because the caliber of talent simply wasn’t there, and they just couldn’t cut it. Because of the awful reputation Tennessee had, Roy Welch could never get good talent, and mainstream guys never wanted to work there. Therefore, the wrestlers that Welch and Buddy Fuller brought to Australia were second-tier talent at best. There were only two guys that they brought in that had any hope at all of following in our footsteps. One was Ron Fuller, who was Buddy’s son and Roy’s grandson. He was a very good in-ring performer. The other guy was Don Carson, who was a pretty decent worker. Still, they couldn’t compare with Jim’s crew. For ten years, he brought the cream of the crop, the best of the best, and the most elite talent from around the world to Australia.

I knew from the get-go that Welch and Fuller would fail in Australia, because not only could they not afford the talent Jim could, but they were used to promoting in Tennessee. Australia was a sophisticated country with people from all over the world. It was very metropolitan and ethnically diverse, and it was clear from day one that they didn’t understand that or take that into consideration. That only exacerbated any hard feelings and resistance from the guys on Jim’s crew when it came to helping out Welch and Fuller. Curtis said, straight off the top, “I’m not putting any hillbillies over!”

Spiros said the same thing. Bulldog Brower had returned from Toronto, and between all the Dianabol, alcohol, and the loss of his wife, he was psychotic and in no mood to put over a “hillbilly.” Mark was walking around saying, “This hillbilly thing will last maybe fifteen minutes, and then we’ll all be back together.”

At the same time, I had given Jim Barnett, Jim Crockett, Fritz Von Erich, and Buddy Fuller my word that I would do everything I could to get the Tennessee talent over, and I kept it, because my word meant something. Perhaps more importantly, though, I was cooperative because of Jim Barnett’s kindness to me over the years, and I knew this deal was important to him. Besides, why vent my frustration and sadness over losing Australia on the new guys coming in? It wasn’t their fault that Jim sold the promotion.

Since no one else would cooperate with the Tennessee talent, Brute Bernard and I ended up being the only two guys who went out and did jobs every single night. Brute and I even put over Jimmy Golden and Mike McCord in the finals of a very high profile tag team tournament to crown the first Australasian Tag Team Champions. And even though I had quite a big reputation in Australia and was still a member of Jim’s elite \$1,000 club, I’m the type of guy that if I gave you my word – I would do everything in my power to live up to what I promised – no matter the consequences. I had to endure quite a bit of razzing from the boys in the back for what I was doing, including Mark and Curtis – who were like brothers to me. Curtis thought I was a fool for helping out, and Mark would constantly say, “Wait until word gets back to the states that you’re doing jobs for hillbillies.”

Brute and I really went out on a limb for them, and did everything we could possibly do to help the Tennessee talent get established in Australia. Jim Crockett told me he appreciated it and would always keep the door open for me in the Carolinas. Jim Barnett really appreciated all the jobs I did, as well. However – what I did night after night meant nothing to those hillbillies Roy Welch and Buddy Fuller. They showed me no gratitude at all that I was a stand up guy for them, and I really resented that.

During that particular tour, we were doing lots of acid, because Curtis had just come back from Maui with some really good stuff. We would board the plane after our matches and stick our tongues out if we wanted a hit. The good King would then walk around hitting all of our tongues with the acid. If anybody didn't want it, they simply didn't stick out their tongue. Naturally, my tongue was always out.

One day, we all got on the plane in Brisbane, and, among others, Jimmy Golden's tongue was out. Jimmy was Roy Welch's grandson and Buddy Fuller's nephew, and he didn't handle the acid particularly well. He totally freaked out, stayed in a park in Sydney for two days, then packed his bags and went home to Tennessee.

After the final show of the tour, Jim Barnett had a big party for his entire crew in Sydney. Everyone was there: Talent, cameramen, technical people, soundmen, announcers, and the rugby and soccer players who had been our security for all those years. We had one big party, and then went our separate ways.

By the way - as I expected, Roy Welch and Buddy Fuller failed in Australia, and had to sell that territory within a matter of months.

# Chapter 18: Mother Hart

While I was in Australia, The Missouri Mauler was in Dallas. One of his favorite TV shows was The Dobie Gillis Show. On that program, there was a rich guy named Chatsworth Osborne III, and every time he got in trouble, his mother would bail him out. From that - The Mauler invented a rich mother for me who was doing everything possible to get her baby boy reinstated back in Texas, and he dubbed her Mother Hart. It was all his idea, and every week he would go out on Houston TV and read these fabulous letters that he wrote, claiming they were from Mother Hart, where she would detail her progress in getting my suspension lifted.

Paul Boesch loved the idea, but that was right up his alley. Paul was a sports entertainment, gimmick-loving kind of guy, who loved promoting things like eat-a-can-of-dog-food-matches. Fritz Von Erich, on the other hand, was more of a traditionalist, and didn't go for the Mother Hart angle at all. He thought it was "too silly and corny," and refused to allow it on Dallas TV. Paul got behind it so much that he wanted to actually bring Mother Hart on television, so The Mauler asked a friend of his wife's if she would portray Mother Hart on Houston TV a couple of times. She was a third grade school teacher who looked old enough to be my mother, and was very refined looking. Paul took her out and got her the appropriate dress, pearls, and hat, and actually dressed this woman up. Paul was really into it!

I returned to Texas in January, 1973, and for my first night back in Houston, The Missouri Mauler and Mother Hart had a "Welcome Home Party" in the ring to celebrate her getting my suspension lifted. As I walked down the aisle, Mother Hart started screaming, "My baby's home! My baby's home!"

I was somewhat torn, because my gimmick was that I was "Playboy" Gary Hart, a street kid from Chicago, and not some rich kid, but I had to admit it was hilarious, and it got over big time.

Blackjack Mulligan was just getting started in the wrestling business. He had recently played for the New York Jets, and was booked against The Missouri Mauler in Corpus Christi one night. We didn't want to beat him clean since he was a big, impressive guy and was just breaking in, so I came up with a finish where I would pull his leg, he would take a nose dive, and The Mauler would cover him thanks to outside interference. However, as I reached through the ropes to grab his leg, I leaned in too far, and Blackjack hit the ropes so hard that the check of his ass hit me in the head and knocked me out. The first thing I remember was The Missouri Mauler standing over me while I lay on the floor asking, "Are you okay? What happened?"

Looking back, I can say that I was the first guy Blackjack Mulligan knocked out in wrestling – but he knocked me out with the check of his ass!

In addition to managing The Missouri Mauler, I also brought Brute Bernard in with me, and he got into a program with Ivan Putski. At the time, Ivan had Danny Plechas as his manager and "interpreter." Ivan spoke Polish, and Danny spoke Romanian, so they would throw a few words back and forth when they did their interviews, and no one was the wiser. At the time,

Ivan's character was childlike and lovable, while Brute's was that of a big brutish simpleton. People loved Ivan, and would give him presents on the way to the ring - like a teddy bear or a duck. Whenever they did, Brute would become fascinated with the gift, and try to take it away from Ivan because he wanted it. One time, Ivan had a wooden duck on a string that quacked when he pulled it. This was in the Sam Houston Coliseum - where traditionalists such as Lou Thesz and Bill Longston made their mark - and there was Ivan Putski pulling around a little quacking duck on wheels in the ring! Brute Bernard was following the little duck, and every time he would reach down to pet it, Ivan would turn around and bark, "NO!"

It was a riot. That's when I started carrying a towel to the ring, so I could put the towel up and cover my face when I was laughing too hard. Ivan would also go out and dance with fat women while Polish music played over the speakers. Brute wanted to dance, as well, but no one would dance with him. They were so much fun to watch, the people loved it, and they drew a lot of money together.

On July 20<sup>th</sup>, 1973, Jack Brisco won the NWA Heavyweight Title from Harley Race in Houston, and on that card, I wrestled Paul Boesch in a bathtub match. It was just my luck. The night the World Title was changing hands, and the hoi-poloi like Sam Muchnick, Eddie Graham, and Fritz Von Erich were in attendance, I was booked in a bathtub match. However, like I mentioned earlier - that was Paul Boesch for you!

The first thing I did when I got back to the hotel that night was call Jerry Brisco and tell him that his brother just won the World Title. At the time, he was wrestling in the Carolinas, and because I had worked there a year ago and knew the schedule, I knew just where to reach him. Since it was a Friday night, I tracked Jerry down at his hotel in Richmond, Virginia, and told him the good news about his brother. Jerry was thrilled to hear, and told me he knew it was going to happen, but wasn't sure when or where it would take place. I was so happy for Jack, as well, because he got what he deserved, and in my eyes, was the last great champion.

At one point, Johnny Valentine and Wahoo McDaniel came to Dallas, and got into singles programs with Brute Bernard and The Missouri Mauler. One day, Fritz called me into his office and told me he was "going to have to sub-go our deal."

If you recall, back in 1967 when I returned to Dallas, Fritz and I made a deal in which I would get an even share of the main event - which was sixteen percent - and always be cut in. That was a deal that we had set in stone - or so I thought. It turned out that Johnny and Wahoo were looking for eight percent of the house, but were only getting five and a quarter, and complained so much that Fritz acquiesced and told me he was dropping my pay.

Now, I want to state upfront that I never took what Johnny and Wahoo did personally, and I never held any animosity towards them at all. I realized that they were used to getting their eight percent, and I also understood that the onus was on the promoter or the booker to tell them that when I was involved, they would get five and a quarter percent. Unfortunately, someone in control like Fritz or Danny Plechas never sat them down and explained to them ahead of time how I was figured in. Yes, one can argue that they shouldn't have been surprised by my deal because I had worked with them both when I managed The Spoiler in 1968, but that was when

they first came into Dallas. By 1973 they were red hot, were used to getting their eight percent, and didn't want to adjust to five and a quarter for anyone.

In the world of professional wrestling, most managers got preliminary pay. However, I wasn't preliminary talent. To be preliminary talent means that you go on first, second, or third – before the intermission. Anything that goes on after the intermission is a money match, and those are the matches I was always involved in. I was doing the hype for those matches, I was participating in those matches, and I was involved in the finishes for those matches. Besides, it wasn't as if the name Gary Hart wasn't a well established firm in Dallas at the time. I could have brought anyone into the territory, walked them to the ring, and have the fans accept him simply based on what I told them he was. So I deserved my money, and if Fritz didn't want to pay me what I was worth, then I wanted out.

# Chapter 19: Georgia

Just as I was looking to leave Dallas, I received a phone call from Jim Barnett, who was now promoting in Georgia. For many years, the booking office in Georgia was called ABC Booking, Inc., headed up by a man named Ray Gunkel. After Ray died, the Georgia promoters closed down ABC and re-opened as Georgia Championship Wrestling, thus squeezing out Ray's widow, Ann. In retaliation, she set up a competing promotion - All South Wrestling Alliance - and took a lot of the Georgia talent with her, including Tom Renesto and Jody Hamilton: The Assassins.

Now, Jim Barnett was in control of Georgia Championship Wrestling, and he asked me to come in and help him and his booker, Bill Watts, rebuild the territory. If Jim needed me, I was there. Ironically, at the same time, Brute Bernard and The Missouri Mauler were also going to Georgia, but they were going to work for All South. Tom Renesto was Ann Gunkel's booker, and Jody Hamilton was his assistant. The Missouri Mauler, aka Larry Hamilton, was Jody's brother, and Brute Bernard was The Missouri Mauler's loyal tag team partner.

Confused? We weren't. The Mauler, Brute, and I completely understood the situation, were all buddies and friends, and were determined not to let the fact that we were headed to opposing promotions in a war-zone impact our friendship.

At the time, there were two young Samoan wrestlers in Dallas who had just arrived from San Francisco. Their names were Reno Tuufuli and Tio Taylor, and they could fly around like the luchadores and do a lot of great things in the ring. I was really impressed with them, and knew that if I could develop their careers, they would be extremely successful in the wrestling business. Keep in mind that this was years before the now more famous Wild Samoans – Afa and Sika – became known. I asked Reno and Tio if they would be interested in going to Georgia to work for Jim Barnett, but they had no idea who he was. The only big name promoter they had heard of was Roy Shire from San Francisco. I assured them that I would take care of them if they came with me to Georgia, so we made a deal, and I brought them in with me and served as their manager.

When I arrived in Atlanta in November of 1973, Bill Watts was the booker, and when he saw me, exclaimed, "Man! That was a long three months!"

I had to laugh, because I had left a few years ago to go to Australia, and was supposed to return in three months to Oklahoma. It was now years later, and we were finally picking up where we left off – but this time in Georgia!

I got off to a really good start, and the two Samoan boys clicked with the audience - because they were different than anything the fans had seen before. They did a fire dance before each match, twirling two sticks with fire on them. Jim would turn off all the lights in the building, and they would dance in a mean style. Jim was so creative, and it was wonderful to be working for him again.



That was also the first time I was ever on color television. There had been color network shows since the 1960's, but at that time not all television was in color, and all the wrestling promotions I had worked for had been in black and white. Color television had a big impact on professional wrestling, because it gave an opportunity to guys who could never have gotten over in black and white to get over in color. With color, a mediocre, mid-card guy could get himself decked out in multi-colored outfits and really get noticed. Once color television became the norm, a wrestler's look became a big part in getting over. With black and white television – it was all about their work. Color television changed wrestling immensely, but it was such a subtle thing that most people didn't even realize it at the time.

One evening after a house show in Columbus, Jim Barnett and I were standing outside with Bill Watts and Fred Ward, the local promoter. As we were all talking, this really big fat girl walked by, and, Bill chuckled, "Look at that fat pig!"

Fred Ward looked like he wanted to kill Bill, and announced, "That's my daughter!"

Talk about your awkward moments.

Not surprisingly, the following week, Bill was suddenly "let go" and shipped off to Florida, where he was going to be the booker. About two weeks later, I was at the television station in Atlanta on a Saturday morning, when I walked the new booker for Georgia Championship Wrestling: Jerry Jarrett.

Jim Barnett brought Jerry in as the new booker simply because he was trying to make nice with Lester Welch, who owned a piece of Georgia, and Jerry is long-rumored to be the bastard son of Roy Welch – who is Lester's brother. That's kind of an open secret in the wrestling world, and it was told to me by Roy Welch's longtime business partner - Nick Gulas. I really liked Nick, and always found him to be a charming guy. People say all sorts of horrible things about him and claim he was a "terrible payoff man," but he was a tower of integrity compared to that hillbilly partner he associated with. When I met Nick, he told me all sorts of salacious gossip about the Welch family, and I became totally intrigued by them.

The Welch's, the Fuller's, the Golden's, the Jarrett's, and the Field's are the big wrestling families in Tennessee – and they're all intertwined with each other in a mind-boggling Hatfield and McCoy-like fashion. Roy Welch got involved in the wrestling business with his brothers, Jack, Herb, and Lester, and eventually attained a position where he ran Tennessee wrestling. Their sister Bonnie married a referee named Virgil "Speedy" Hatfield, and their sons wrestled under the names of Lee, Don, and Bobby Fields. Roy's son Buddy Fuller – who failed in Australia with him – had two wrestling sons named Ron and Robert Fuller. Roy's daughter Ruby married a man named Bill Golden, and they had a son who wrestled as Jimmy Golden. If you recall, Jimmy was the one who had the bad acid trip in Australia. Now, if the rumors about Jerry Jarrett are true, then that would make Buddy Fuller and Jerry brothers, and Jerry's son Jeff Jarrett and Buddy's sons, Ron and Robert Fuller, and Ruby's son, Jimmy Golden - cousins.

Confusing, isn't it? You need a scorecard just to keep track of them all. Not only that, but it sounds like a bunch of inbred hillbillies, if you ask me. Don't get me wrong - I'm not saying they're like the backwoods people in "Deliverance"...but they're awfully close.

I know it sounds like I'm picking on them – but there is a reason that I feel this way about them, and I want you to see the big picture so you can understand my mindset. These are people that I did a really big favor to in Australia, and they never – at any time – said “thank you.” Then, when things fell apart for them down under, they had the audacity to complain that “nobody” helped them – completely ignoring the fact that Brute Bernard and I put their talent over every night at great expense to our reputations. My whole career was on a handshake and my word. When I did someone a big favor – I was never expecting a tremendous payoff, but a simple “thank you” would have been nice. I got nothing from those hillbillies except for grief.

Nick Gulas told me that my experience with Roy Welch and Buddy Fuller in Australia wasn't personal, because each and every one of the members of their “clan” in Tennessee had very low opinions of wrestlers. Apparently, they seemed to think wrestlers were there for them to abuse and treat like dirt. Nick told me stories about how they would make the Tennessee talent come to their farm and clean their stables, wash their cars, and cut their grass. Plus, if a local wrestler's wife could cook really well, she was expected to prepare a large dinner and bring it over for the whole extended Welch family to enjoy! Ever notice how all of those hillbillies always congregated together? Ever hear anyone say anything good about any of them? Birds of a feather...

Here's just one example of how they treated their wrestlers in Tennessee: An angle was worked with one of their wrestlers - Bill Dundee - where they shaved his head, and then the following month, they shaved his wife's head! Here's a guy who lives in a Tennessee community and has children in school, and the office wants to shave his wife's head on TV? Think about that. These are not refined people. They have no sense of morals, no decency, no integrity, and I have no respect for any of them. They looked down on wrestlers, but at the same time, the wrestlers in Tennessee allowed it.

Anyhow, Jerry Jarrett was the new booker in Georgia, and all I knew was that anytime his name came up, it was done in a derogatory fashion. In all my years, I have never heard anyone say anything nice about that man. The first thing Jerry told me was that he wasn't happy with The Samoans, and that he wanted me to get rid of them.

“Get rid of them? I just brought them in with me from Texas!”

“I don't care,” he shot back. “Either you get rid of them or I will.”

“Hey - I don't work for you,” I advised him. “You may be the booker, but I was hired by Jim Barnett. Anything you have to say to me, tell him and he'll come to me.”

I had no respect for Jerry Jarrett or his “knowledge” of wrestling, and wasn't about to let him tell me who I could or couldn't manage. Besides, I had just done one hell of a favor for his hillbilly kin in Australia, and the least he could do was show me just an ounce of gratitude.

Instead, Jerry had the gall to tell me to stop hanging out with The Missouri Mauler and Brute Bernard - because "they work for the opposition." That really annoyed me, because out of everyone on Jim Barnett's roster in Australia, the only two guys that cooperated with the incoming Tennessee crew were Brute Bernard and I. That shows you the hypocritical mentality of those hillbilly ingrates. When Brute was my partner in Australia and we were getting those hillbillies over, Brute was the greatest guy in the world – but now, because he was working for Ann Gunkel – he was evil, and I was expected to disassociate myself from him. I advised Jerry that I had been friends with Brute and The Mauler for awhile, and just because they were working for Ann Gunkel's group wasn't going to change that. He demanded that I disassociate myself from them, and I steadfastly refused.

At that point, Jerry Jarrett went on this campaign against me, painting me as a "spy." He insisted to anyone who would listen that I "secretly worked for Ann Gunkel," and was only working for Jim Barnett "to spy on Georgia Championship Wrestling." Fortunately, Jim Barnett knew me and was confident that I would never be involved with anything like that. Jim never even pulled me aside or questioned me about it, because he knew I was totally loyal to him. Jerry continued his crusade, though, and at one point accused me of giving "secrets" to the opposition! Believe me when I tell you there were no "secrets" Jerry Jarrett had that anybody would want. What would Ann Gunkel's group have stolen, anyways - a shave-a-woman's-head-match?

One night, I was in the Auditorium in downtown Atlanta, when Bobby Shane approached me. If you recall, Bobby and I were roommates in Michigan together, and we were longtime friends. Apparently, Jerry thought that sending Bobby to talk with me would change my attitude. Bobby tried talking to me about my resistance in letting The Samoans go, but I cut him off and said, "I respect you and we're friends, but I will not get rid of The Samoans. I just won't do it."

Bobby was really trying to bring me around, and offered, "What if Jerry puts you with 'Cowboy' Bobby Duncum?"

I knew Bobby Duncum from Texas. Bobby went to West Texas State with the Funks, was part of the Texas gang, and I had no problems with managing him. I told Bobby, "That would be fine, but I won't get rid of The Samoans. If Jerry wants me to manage Bobby, as well, I'll do it, but I gave The Samoans my word, and that means something to me."

Sometime later, I was standing in the hallway before a show, when Jerry Jarrett walked by. Without even looking at me, he barked, "I want to see you in the bathroom."

I walked in, and Jerry started telling me that he was the boss, that I was going to fire The Samoans, and that I was going to stop hanging out with The Missouri Mauler and Brute Bernard. While he was lecturing me, he had a chain that he was swinging around his fingers, trying to intimidate me. He then added that if I didn't do what he wanted, I would have to answer to him. The second he said that, I flipped. I grabbed him by the neck and began choking him. I pushed him into a stall, shoved him against the wall, and started bitch-slapping him across his face. I was in a rage as I told him, "The only reason you exist is because your mother talked Roy Welch into slipping her the sausage one night, and that's how you popped out - you dirty, lowlife bastard!"

I was getting ready to shove his head into the toilet when Jim Barnett broke through the door, screaming at the top of his lungs, “Gary! You are a devil! Get out of my arena!”

As I looked at Jerry Jarrett lying over the toilet, I warned him, “You got a pass this time, but if I ever see you again, you won’t be so lucky.”

Now, what I did was no big macho thing on my part. I was 250 pounds, 6’4”, and a street kid from Chicago, while Jerry Jarrett was a little weasely guy, who maybe weighed 160 pounds, and was nothing more than a bastard from Tennessee. It was no contest. It’s just that I didn’t like the way he was demanding that I break my word to my guys – because that was something I never did. I’m not proud that I smacked Jerry Jarrett around – but I had to do it, because he needed someone to tell him who he was and where he came from.

The next night, I was booked in Griffin, and the main event was Robert Fuller and Bob Armstrong against The Samoans. We had our match, and when we got back to the dressing room, everyone else on the card had left because we were on last. The building was set up where the dressing room was on one side of the building, and the shower facilities were on the other. Tio asked Rob if he and Bob wanted to take their shower first, and when Rob told them to go ahead, The Samoans got up and left. As I was putting my suit in my bag, Robert came over and menacingly said, “I don’t like the way you treated Jerry Jarrett last night.”

Remember – if the rumors are true – Jerry Jarrett would not only be Robert Fuller’s booker, but also his bastardized uncle. I told Robert that I simply treated Jerry the way he had tried to treat me. A few words were said back and forth, and then Robert sneered, “How would you like it if I kicked your ass while your boys are out of the room?”

If you recall, I always carried a razor in my pocket, so I pulled it out and said, “Try it and I’ll cut your eyeballs out of your head.”

Robert turned grey and stammered, “I was just kidding!”

“Well I’m not,” I said. “Now get out of this room.”

Both Robert and Bob left, The Samoans returned, and I went home.

The following day, Jim Barnett called me, yelling, “Have you lost your mind completely?? What is the matter with you?”

I tried explaining why I did what I had done, but it was of no use. Jim had no choice but to let me go. Immediately, a rumor went around that I was going to work for Ann Gunkel, but that was never even a consideration.

## Chapter 20: Florida

Shortly after Jim Barnett fired me in Georgia, he called me to say he had gotten me booked in Florida – which was another territory he owned a piece of. Florida was a funny territory when it came to “owners.” Eddie Graham was the real owner, but over the years he sold off something like one-hundred-and-eighty percent of the booking office to guys like Hiro Matsuda, Duke Keomuka, Mike Graham, Jerry Brisco, Jack Brisco, Buddy Colt, and Jim Barnett. He would sell anyone a percentage of his booking office if he was having a bad time and needed money, and didn’t care who “owned” what. When Jim told me the news, I can’t say I was thrilled, because Florida didn’t have the greatest reputation when it came to payoffs, but the silver lining was that I knew Bill Watts was a fantastic booker.

I went down to Florida in February, 1974, and moved into a trailer in a Tampa orange grove. A couple of chapters earlier, I was an international player, living it up in my Australian penthouse, and drinking tea with the good King laukea. Now, here I was in a trailer.

What a trip.

I would have loved to have brought The Samoans to Florida with me, but apparently, after they learned that Robert Fuller had threatened me, they tracked him down and smacked him around pretty good. They were very protective of me as I was of them. Needless to say, they were fired immediately and flew back to Oakland – soured on the wrestling business. I eventually got Tio Taylor booked in Florida, but at the time I arrived I had no one to manage, so Bill suggested that I to go around a couple of weeks wrestling under a mask as The Jackal, watch the shows, and see if there was anyone I wanted to manage. Then, when the time was right, I could be unveiled as “Playboy” Gary Hart.

I did just that, wrestling on the undercard every night and watching the rest of the matches. I noticed a lot of great, young talent like Kevin Sullivan, Mike Graham, Steve Keirn, and Don Muraco, but the one that really stood out to me was Pak Song. He was really unusual looking, and the moment I saw him, I knew that I wanted to manage him. As soon as I told Bill that I wanted to manage and develop Pak, I went on TV and lost my Jackal mask in a match against Jack Brisco, who was the NWA Champion at the time. It only took Jack three minutes to beat me, rip my mask off, and reveal that The Jackal had been “Playboy” Gary Hart, but when he did, I received a very high-profile entrance into Florida.

Pak Song was a big name athlete in Korea, who had served in the Korean marines, and was so well known that he married Miss Korea. They moved to the United States so he could pursue a career in professional wrestling, and had twin daughters while he was in Amarillo working for the Funks. Pak was a wonderful, family oriented guy, and we hit it off instantly.

I also became Dusty Rhodes’ manager once again, and it was great to be reunited with him. We didn’t live too far from each other, so we would often drive to the towns together. One night, after the matches, we were driving home to Tampa in Dusty’s car, and Little Tokyo, the midget wrestler, was in the back seat. We were listening to music, I was smoking a little reefer, and Dusty and Little Tokyo were drinking beers. It was a three-hundred mile trip, and at one

point Little Tokyo passed out. When we got to Tampa, Dusty dropped me off at my trailer and took off. Dusty later told me that at 8:00 a.m. the next day, he heard this ferocious pounding on his front door, and thought it was the police. When he opened the door, he saw a sweaty Little Tokyo demanding to know why he was left in the car. It turned out that Dusty had forgotten Little Tokyo was passed out in his back seat, drove home, and went to sleep! Dusty and I cried laughing over that one.

Because we had a history together in Oklahoma, Bill Watts asked me to become his booking assistant, and I happily accepted. Bill became quite a mentor to me during that time period, and I remember wanting to be just like him. Thanks to Bill Watts, I learned how to run house shows, how to handle administrative and interoffice issues, the art of television production and formatting, and basically, how to book a major territory. I also learned a lot about politics. Even though Bill and I were coming up with the angles and finishes for every show, we did it in a way where everyone on the cards felt like they were getting a say. We would always get input from the talent – whether they were good ideas or bad ideas – and encouraged everyone to contribute, so that everyone felt good about themselves and their programs. We would use the good ideas and tweak the bad ones in a way that whoever came up with them still felt like they had invested in their finish. Bill really taught me a lot about booking, and I am extremely grateful for that.

Eventually, the decision was made to turn Dusty babyface. We deliberately chose not to tease it and make it obvious there was dissension in the ranks, but instead, wanted it to just happen out of the blue. In May of 1974, we booked a match in Tampa between the team of Dusty and Pak against Eddie and Mike Graham. During the match, Dusty was holding Mike, and as Pak went to hit Mike, Mike ducked and Dusty got whacked. Dusty then beat up Pak and I, and at that moment, “The American Dream” was born.

Around that same time, I changed Pak’s name ever-so-slightly to Pak Song Nam. The Viet Nam war was a very personal issue for many Americans in 1974, and I wanted to - in a subtle way - tie Pak Song to Viet Nam. Then, I suggested that Dusty go on television and tell the people that his “brother,” Billy Bob, died in Viet Nam - fighting so that men like Pak Song Nam could be free.

Thunderbolt Patterson had been a tremendous attraction in Florida, and his interview style was one of the key ingredients in his getting over big-time with the fans. Since Thunderbolt hadn’t been in Florida for a while, I suggested to Dusty, “Since Thunderbolt isn’t around - you should start doing his shuck and jive routine.”

Dusty started doing it, and it really got him over huge with the Florida fans. In no time, Dusty Rhodes became a better Thunderbolt Patterson than Thunderbolt Patterson ever was! I was very good at street talk, too, so I chimed in and started doing my own jive interviews against Dusty, and that’s when I started calling him “The son of a plumber” – because that was true! Dusty and I did a lot of great things interview-wise, and had some classic “jive interviews” against each other.

When I say that we were doing “jive interviews,” I want to make it clear that I was simply mocking Dusty, because he had that lisp thing going, and by no means were we going out there and making fun of black people. It was quite the contrary, actually. Dusty and I were both street guys, and he had experiences like I did as a child. Remember the racism I witnessed in the south as a child – and the impact that had on me? Dusty had humanity towards black people, as well, and the black fans really picked up on that. They became such great supporters of his that when he was wrestling one night, a black lady fell out of the balcony. When a reporter interviewed her and asked her what caused her to fall out of the balcony, she said that she was “just trying to get a glimpse of The American Dream.”

There was something in my humanity that black people picked up on, as well. The great Stevie Ray Vaughn once said that he felt “like a black man trapped in a white man’s body.” I could relate to that, and in order to really connect with the black fans, sometimes during my interviews I would randomly throw out a statement like, “I’m not totally white, you know.”

Between our great jive interviews, the Vietnam war tie-in, and the fact that we were all former stable-mates, Dusty Rhodes, Pak Song Nam, and I had sixteen weeks of sellout business all throughout Florida that year. We did magnificent business everywhere, and used to say, “There ain’t no more after ’74,” because we knew that there was no way to top the success we were having that year. Dusty, Pak, and I worked really hard to make that feud memorable, and it paid off, because people still talk about it to this day.

On July 4, 1974, Pak was booked to wrestle Dusty in the Jacksonville Coliseum, and as Pak and I were in the ring, Dusty came down the aisle wrapped in the American flag. It was a phenomenal site, and the fans were going wild. We drew over \$50,000 that night - which was the biggest house in the history of Florida. Sir Oliver Humperdink and I went back to the hotel and wanted to do something unique to commemorate our successful show. Humpy was looking across the street at the Gator Bowl when he got a silly grin on his face and suggested, “How about you and I walk around the Gator Bowl backwards? That’s probably never been done.”

I loved his idea, but added, “Let’s do it while smoking a doobie!”

Looking back, I don’t know what I enjoyed more that evening - my time with Humpy, or the doobie.

For that \$50,000 house in Jacksonville, by the way, Eddie Graham paid me and Pak \$500 each. That’s my big beef with Eddie Graham: I didn’t like the way he paid. Pak and I were in the main event for the biggest house the state ever got – and he gave us \$1,000 total. And if it sounds like I was paid badly - some of the underneath guys there - while we were doing sellout business, mind you – were getting \$60 a night. Yes, Eddie was a brilliant guy who had great ideas about wrestling that a lot of people learned from. And yes, I enjoyed sitting down with him, having a few drinks, and arguing about wrestling philosophies. However - was I an Eddie protégé? No. Did I look at him as a God-like figure? No. Did I respect him for what he had accomplished through all his hard work and determination? You’re damn right. He came up through the ranks and made his bones by filling up arenas and maintaining his main event position.

Even still, the way a promoter pays his talent is a very important issue, and says a lot about the man. I never had any problems with payoffs from Fred Kohler, Bert Ruby, or The Sheik - because I didn't know any better. Dory Funk, Sr. was the first promoter who really showed me how I deserved to be paid, and after that - anyone who ever tried to pay me less than what he did would have a problem. If it wasn't for the fact that I had basically been banished by Jim Barnett to Florida in order to serve out some sort of purgatory for beating up Jerry Jarrett in Georgia, I would never have accepted Eddie Graham's atrocious payoffs - especially after seeing the way Jim Barnett and Jim Crockett treated their crew. Believe me, if it was any other situation, when I received that \$500 payoff, I would have been long gone. However, I knew I was being punished and I took it like a man.

Eventually, I brought Terry Funk in and managed him in a run against Dusty Rhodes. Their matches did great business, and the three of us came up with the "I Quit" match, dubbing it, "The match to end all matches." That kind of a match had never been done before, and was a true original. Terry now says it was his idea and Dusty now says it was his idea, but I'm telling you: It was the three of us who came up with it. The ending was that I would quit for Terry, and my cue was when Dusty shoved a stick in Terry's eye, Terry would holler, "My eye!" After saying it three times, I was to throw in the towel, and that was the first finish for the first "I Quit" match ever.

Dusty and I continued our feud, even having one match where, after I lost, he shaved my beard off. Then, we worked an angle where he kicked me in my face. That idea came from the time in Australia when it really happened with Brute Bernard and Mark Lewin. After Dusty kicked me, I began wearing a face mask, explaining that Dusty broke my cheekbones and nose.

Bill and I brought some good talent into Florida, such as The Mongolian Stomper and the tag team of Dominic DeNucci and Tony Parisi, both of whom I knew from Australia. I also created "Gary Hart's Army" to continue my war with Dusty. I brought Bobby Duncum in from Georgia, where I was scheduled to manage him but never did. Bobby had some great matches with Dusty, and is a lot like Dick Murdoch, Stan Hansen, and the Funk's: A good ol' Texan boy and a terrific, straight-up guy.

Bobby and I had a lot of laughs together. A match was booked for the Tampa Armory between me and Bobby against Dusty Rhodes and The Haiti Kid, the midget wrestler. We set up a few spots where The Haiti Kid would bite me on my ass, stomp my toes, run between my legs, and stuff like that. The audience really loved it, and I did, too. When the match started, all the wrestlers had come out from the dressing room to watch from the balcony - because they knew that this match would be a sight. At one point, I dropped down to all fours and told The Haiti Kid, "Alright! Now I'm your size!"

He snatched me in a headlock, I threw him off, he hit the ropes, and came off with a cross body and pinned me. The building went nuts, and I could see Dick Murdoch up on the balcony almost falling off he was laughing so hard. Everyone thought it was hilarious, and putting a midget over right in the middle of the ring is one of the most memorable things I ever did in my career. I loved wrestling midgets in tag matches, and did one of those matches with Pak, as well. However, when I brought the midget over to Pak and yelled for him to hit him, Pak couldn't



bring himself to do it. Even though it was a work, he quietly begged, “Gary-son, please, no me little boy hit.”

He couldn’t even call him a midget, because he didn’t know the word!

Bill really liked my “Gary Hart’s Army” concept, and wanted to develop it even further. He figured that since we ran shows in Miami and Palm Beach – which both had a heavy Jewish population – it would be great if I shaved my beard, dressed up like Hitler, and led my wrestlers out to the ring doing the goosetstep. I was always very careful about how I presented myself, and I had to be comfortable with my character in order to do it right. And even though I portrayed an evil character, I always tried to do it with a little bit of class, and I didn’t want to associate myself with the Holocaust under any circumstances. I would have been more uncomfortable doing the Sieg Heil and the goosetstep than I had been when I was “Gay” Gary Hart in Amarillo, so I told Bill that there was no way I would parade around in a Hitleresque fashion. During this time, Bill and I had gotten Eddie Graham to put two billboards up in Tampa in order to promote our weekly television show. Bill kept insisting that I dress up like Hitler for the billboard photo shoot, so I finally told him, “I’ll do the picture if that’s what you really want – but I will not go out to the ring and act like Hitler.”

Thankfully, that billboard in Tampa was as far as my “Nazi character” ever went.

One night, we had a battle royal in Tampa with the winner announced as getting something ridiculous like \$50,000. I mean, Tampa was a good town, but we could have said the pot was something a little more realistic. Anyways, I was at ringside managing Bobby Duncum, who would bring someone over to me and I would pull them out. There were twenty-five guys in the ring, so the referee couldn’t see what we were doing, but the people on my side of the ring could. We had planned to do it on every side of the ring so everyone could see it, but before we could, this hippy jumped over the railing and sucker punched me. It felt like a girl had hit me, but I turned around and grabbed him by his throat. He had this long pony tail, so I grabbed it and was going to throw him back over the rail, when suddenly Dick Slater slid under the bottom rope and kicked this guy in his face so hard that it knocked my hand off his hair. Dick then looked around at the audience and growled, “Don’t anybody touch this guy!”

Dick then rolled back in the ring and continued battling. I was so impressed with his sense of camaraderie and tenacity that as soon as I got to the dressing room, I told Bill that I had to manage Dick Slater, as well.

During the summer of 1974, Dusty Rhodes and I went into the T-shirt business together. Yes, we were in the midst of a heated feud throughout the state of Florida - but in reality - we were very tight. We invested \$250 apiece and printed up “Dusty Rhodes” T-shirts. Dusty then sold them out of the back of his white 1972 El Dorado. It had stars and stripes down the sides, and across the front it said, “The American Dream.” It was very noticeable, and when he pulled up at an arena, people would rush his car to meet him. Then, when he would open his trunk, people would see the T-shirts and ask if they could buy one. He would tell them to speak to some friend of his, and leave him there to sell every single one. We printed up these T-shirts in secret, because wrestlers weren’t allowed to sell concessions, and over a period of six weeks - before

Eddie Graham caught on and made us stop – Dusty and I made \$2,500 selling shirts out of the back of his trunk!

That's when Dusty and I decided to go into the concert promoting business. We would take the \$2,500 that we made on our T-shirt venture, and invest it in a rock concert at the Fort Hesterly Armory featuring Dusty Rhodes. I tried to talk him into booking Bobby "Blue" Bland for \$1,000, because that would leave us \$1,500 to rent the arena and promote the concert. However, Dusty took an affront to that, and made it clear that he didn't need Bobby "Blue" Bland to "support" him – he wanted to headline the concert on his own!

Actually, my idea was to have Bobby headline the show, and just have Dusty come out as a guest for a couple of songs! Somehow, Dusty assumed I was suggesting Bobby "Blue" Bland play backup for Dusty Rhodes! After nixing Bobby's involvement, Dusty insisted that we promote "The American Dream's Rock 'N' Roll Revival," and I figured that just might work. "The American Dream" was huge in Tampa – and Dusty always loved to sing. He and Dick Murdoch would go out, have a few beers, and get up and sing at the bars in Tampa on a pretty regular basis. In fact, a young kid named Terry Bollea used to play bass in local Tampa bands at the time, and he backed up Dusty and Dick on more than one occasion. Terry Bollea grew up to be, of course, Hulk Hogan.

Dusty and I booked the show for Sunday night, October 6, 1974, and set about putting together a backing band for him. We budgeted \$500 for the musicians – and they were pretty good. Dusty then recruited Bob Armstrong, Mike Graham, Jerry Brisco, Don Muraco, and Steve Keirn – dubbed The Outlaws - to be his backup singers. Unfortunately, they couldn't sing or dance – but they never claimed they could. Dusty and I worked up a pretty good set list, with songs like "Workin' at the Car Wash Blues" by Jim Croce, "Okie From Muskogee" by Merle Haggard, "Long, Black Limousine," by Elvis Presley, and songs by David Allen Coe and Waylon Jennings thrown in for good measure. We advertised the concert in newspapers and posters around town – and hoped that "The American Dream" could pack 'em in.

I couldn't be at the concert that night because Dusty and I were feuding. So at 8:30 p.m. - thirty minutes after the concert started - I told my wife I was going to drive by the Fort Hesterly Armory, take a look at the parking lot, and get a sense of the turnout. Imagine my surprise when I saw there were about one-hundred-and-twenty cars in the parking lot! At that point, I realized that either we didn't do a very good job of promoting the concert, or nobody cared about hearing Dusty sing. I spoke to Dusty after the concert, and he blamed the poor turnout on the office, reasoning that if they would have allowed us to promote it on the TV show – we would have had a sellout. Dusty wasn't upset, though, and had a great time that night – and I guess that was the most important thing. In fact - for all you hardcore collectors out there - there's a videotape of that concert floating around out there somewhere featuring Dusty Rhodes up there signing and dancing.

Business in Florida was so good, and the trips were so long, that every now and then, some of the boys would put up \$50 each and charter two planes. There was a blue one called Old Blue, and an orange one inexplicably called Big Red. We leased them from a company in Tampa, and the pilots were retired military men who had flown during the Korean and Viet Nam

wars. One time, we were coming back from Miami, and a couple of the guys lit up a number and passed it around. When it got to me and I didn't take a hit, everyone looked at me like I had gone mad. When I explained that I simply wasn't comfortable smoking a joint on someone else's plane, everyone laughed at me, called me a "Goody Goody," and said that it must be because I was working in the office. I made it clear that the office had nothing to do with it, but that I personally found what they were doing rude and disrespectful, because the pilot had fought for us in a war.

Sure enough, the first thing the pilot did when we landed was call Eddie Graham. That incident blew up to the point that Jim Barnett was notified, and he immediately flew down for an "emergency meeting" with the entire roster! That in and of itself was pretty historical, because it was the first time a promoter had to come in and scold a group of guys for marijuana – and it was the first time drugs was ever be discussed in a group setting like that.

The day of the meeting, I was curious to see how Jim would handle it, because I knew that he personally found nothing wrong with marijuana, as he and I had shared a few numbers over the years! When we were all gathered together, Jim told us that he was very disappointed in the guys who were smoking dope on the plane, and that whoever had smoked would be let go immediately. Meanwhile, Eddie was furiously calling every stooge he knew, and since I was on the plane and it was well-known that I smoked marijuana - my name got included as one of the culprits. This had gotten out of hand, and people were literally going to lose their jobs over this incident. Even though Buddy Colt had his own plane, he was on the plane with us that night, and even thanked me for not taking a hit when it was passed to me. Once he heard that I was being implicated, he went straight to the office to speak on my behalf. He told Eddie Graham that while there were people smoking on the plane, I wasn't one of them.

Buddy is a quality guy in every way. I had originally met him during my run in Georgia, and I always liked him a lot, but after he stood up for me and cleared my name when he didn't have to, I gained a newfound respect for him.

In late 1974, Bill Watts told me that he had made a deal to go back to Oklahoma, where he would be the booker. He then asked me if I would come along with him and be his assistant there, as well. When I agreed, we started making plans to leave Florida, and my old friend Bobby Shane was brought in to replace Bill as the booker. The plan was that Bill and I would work through February, 1975, finishing up our responsibilities and transferring the book to Bobby – and then we would be off to book Oklahoma.

## Chapter 21: February 19, 1975

On February 19<sup>th</sup>, 1975, we had a show in the Miami Convention Center. After the matches, Bobby Shane, Buddy Colt, Dennis McCord, and I left the arena and went to Wolfie's to get something to eat, and then we went to the airport to board Buddy's plane – a single engine Cessna 173 - to go home to Tampa. Buddy was flying the plane, Dennis was next to him, Bobby was behind Buddy, and I was behind Dennis.

When we had originally flown into Miami, Bobby was behind Dennis, but I asked if we could switch seats going back, because Dennis wasn't as tall as Buddy, and I could have more leg room. Bobby didn't mind at all, because it was going to be a "working flight." As I mentioned in the previous chapter, Bobby was in the process of taking over the book from Bill Watts, and as Bill's assistant, I was reviewing the TV formats and going over the building managers with him, and I was also going to help him book a few shows during the flight, as well.

As we left Miami, Buddy called Tampa control and asked how the weather was over there. They said there were severe thunderstorms moving across the bay, so Buddy decided to change course and land in Sarasota. Before he could change course, an air traffic controller from McNeal Air Force Base in Tampa came on and said that if we wanted to go to Tampa, we could make it, assuring us, "You won't have any problems, and you'll probably get here before the storm comes in."

Buddy asked us all if we wanted to land in Sarasota, or if we should head on to Tampa, and we collectively made the unanimous decision to go home. That's why we were on the airplane in the first place. There was no concern about the storm, because the air traffic controller assured us we would make it to Tampa in time.

When we broke through the clouds over Tampa, however, we realized that the air traffic controller had seriously misjudged the storm's movement, and we were smack-dab in the middle of it. The landing was going to be difficult, and on Buddy's first attempt, we were high and to the right, so he veered out over the bay to go back in for another approach. As soon as we started over the bay, Dennis screamed, "For God sakes pull up, we're gonna hit the water!"

As soon as I heard him say that, I reached down and unlatched my seat-belt. The next thing I remember was that I popped to the top of the bay, and it was at that moment I realized I had just survived a horrible event.

Buddy's plane had hit the bay cart wheeling at one-hundred-and-eighty miles per hour, and as it broke apart, I was thrown out because, fortunately, I had unbuckled my seat-belt in the nick of time. The plane crashed three-hundred yards offshore, and I was thrown an additional one-hundred-and-fifty yards away from the wreckage.

Way off in the distance, I could see a light, but I didn't see hide or hair of Bobby, Dennis, or Buddy. I started swimming towards the light, and even though it was raining badly and the water was choppy, everything seemed so serene. I started to realize that I couldn't see out of my

right eye, and when I reached up to touch my head, I could feel my skull. Even still, I had no pain, no fear, and no concern. I was completely at peace, and wasn't afraid.

My only ambition was to get to that light, and there was no doubt in my mind that I was going to make it. I swam for a while, and then came upon Dennis. He had gone down with the plane, but being a power lifter, was able to curl his seat-belt to give himself enough room to slip out. I was relieved to see him, but he told me he couldn't make it any further. I instructed him to lay back and float, and then I grabbed him with my left hand and pulled him along as I swam. At the time, my left arm and wrist were broken, but I didn't know it yet. I just got a grip on him, and did the backstroke with my right arm until we got to shallow water. At that point I said, "Come on, Dennis, we can walk now."

He just looked at me and said, "Gary, I can't walk."

Since his feet were caught in the bottom of the plane, they were all torn up and rendered useless. Then, I heard Buddy's voice out in the distance, screaming, "Is anybody there? Is anybody there?"

I told Dennis to stay put, and swam back out in the bay towards Buddy's screams. I don't know how far I went, but when I got to him, I immediately asked if he knew where Bobby was. He said no, so I hoped that Bobby saw the light himself and swam on his own. Buddy was severely injured. He had no problem getting off his seat-belt when he sank with the plane, but the rudder pedals wrapped around his ankle and lower leg, and broke his leg in a compound fracture. It was only hanging on by tendons. Just as I did with Dennis, I pulled Buddy to shallow water, and sat the two of them together. At that point, I turned my attention to finding Bobby.

I swam back out, and started hollering his name. Of all the guys, Bobby was actually a true friend. Don't get me wrong - I liked Buddy and Dennis a lot, but I had known Bobby for years, and we lived together when we worked in Michigan. I was very concerned that he wasn't there with us, especially knowing that Buddy and Dennis went down with the plane. After calling his name for quite awhile and searching to no avail, I made the decision to stop searching for Bobby, and to go get help for Buddy, Dennis, and myself.

The light I had been swimming towards was on top of a dock. It was low tide, and the wall from where the water ended to the top of the dock must have been twenty-five feet high. There was a ladder, but there was a good twelve feet between the water and the foot of the ladder, so Dennis and Buddy let me crawl up on their backs so I could reach it. Both of them - with one leg each - stood up so that I could climb on their shoulders and reach the ladder. I climbed the ladder to the dock where the light was at. There was a boat there, so I pushed it into the bay so Buddy and Dennis could climb in and get out of the water. There was also a house by the dock, so I started pounding and kicking on the door.

Unbeknownst to me, due to the force of the crash, I lost all the clothes that I had on - my shirt, my pants, my underwear, my rings, my watch, my socks, my shoes - everything. I was standing there completely naked, with caked blood all over me, and my skull exposed. When the

people came to the door and saw a naked bloody man pounding on their door, they panicked and closed the door, screaming, “Get out of here! We’re calling the police!”

They were freaking out. This was 2:30 a.m., and they didn’t know that a plane had just crashed in the bay. Fortunately, I had the presence of mind to kick on the door five more times to make sure that they would indeed call the police. Then, I walked back to where Buddy and Dennis were and yelled down to them, “Help is on the way!”

At that point, I sat down under a tree. I still didn’t have any pain or any fear, and was very collected, peaceful, and calm. I heard sirens, and the first person I saw was Bob Roop’s wife, who lived nearby and heard on a police scanner that a plane had gone down in the bay. She wanted to know what she could do for me, so I said, “Call my wife and tell her that I’m injured but alive, and that I’m on my way to the hospital.”

The next person I saw was a policeman, and as soon as he saw me he said, “I guess you won’t be at the matches on Tuesday night.”

When I was being put into the ambulance, Dick Murdoch – who arrived after hearing about the crash - came running and jumped in the back with me. The ambulance driver started screaming that he had to get out, but Dick growled, “Nobody’s throwing me out of here! He’s my friend and I’m staying with him!”

He stayed with me and talked to me during the entire ride, even joking, “That’s the biggest bump I ever saw you take!”

Dick was so wonderful that night, and even went into the emergency room with me. I told him, “Dickie, if I should die, tell my wife to cremate me, take me back to Texas, and spread my ashes there.”

He assured me he would, and waited with me until my wife arrived. The last thing I remember was that when my wife finally got to the hospital, she started crying on Dick Murdoch’s belly.

I went out for three days. When I woke up, I was extremely relieved and thankful to be alive. I told my wife, “I had a dream that Duke Keomuka was here, and he told me that I was a hero the way I saved Buddy and Dennis. He even made a joke that I killed my heat, and that I’ll have to work real hard to get it back. Then, when I asked him about Bobby, he said he didn’t make it.”

“That was yesterday,” she said. “It was Duke. He really was here. Eddie Graham and Jim Barnett were here, too.”

“I didn’t see Eddie or Jim,” I said. “I only talked with Duke.”

“No, Eddie was here,” she replied. “He was in the room with you and Duke. Jim was out in the hall with me, because he couldn’t bear to see you in the condition you were in. Fritz and Doris Von Erich called, as well.”

I was hoping Duke’s visit was just a dream, but unfortunately, it wasn’t. I really wanted to believe that since Buddy, Dennis, and I made it - Bobby survived, as well. When my wife confirmed that Bobby had died, it had a tremendous affect on me. I was sent into despair, and all I wanted to do was go back to sleep.

After sleeping for two more days, Fritz called again. This time I was able to speak with him, and he offered to send a plane and bring me home to Dallas. I told him that I appreciated the offer, but that I needed to stay in Florida and recuperate. He then passed the phone to Red Bastien, Danny Plechas, and Bronko Lubitch, and I spoke with them all briefly before I went back to sleep.

A few more days of sleep later, I started coming back around. At that point I knew I was messed up, because I couldn’t lift my head off of the pillow or raise my arms off the bed. I literally could not move. If I coughed, the doctors would have to give me hard drugs, and if I sneezed –they would have to call the Pope. The pain was just unthinkable. It was agonizing. That’s the only time I ever did hard drugs in my life, and I still hurt.

Two-hundred-and-eighty stitches were put in my head alone. The crash knocked out all of my teeth. The tip of my nose was cut off. I lost all sight in my right eye forever. I broke my back, my left leg, my left wrist, and my left arm. I fractured my sternum, my clavicle, and some vertebrae on my back.

I was lucky, though, because when I arrived to the emergency room, there was a plastic surgeon on duty who sewed my nose back on and sewed my head up, and I really don’t have bad scars on my face. I do have severe scarring on my left leg, though, because when I went through the top of the plane, I caught it on the metal and steel, and it cut me up quite a bit. Even though all my injuries were on my left side, the entire right side of my body was black, blue, purple, and yellow - every disgusting color you could imagine.

When Jim Barnett came with Eddie and Duke that first day, he took my wife to lunch, feeling she needed to get away from the hospital for a while. He told her that he would be sending us \$500 a week to cover our costs, and that the Florida office would chip in an additional \$250 a week, because we had no health insurance. They took very good care of us.

I never held Buddy Colt responsible for anything. The person that put us in that situation was the air traffic controller at McNeal Air Force Base. It was his fault, not Buddy’s, and I consider Buddy to be a very good friend of mine to this day. Buddy Colt would have been a great World Champion, because he was 6’1” and 238 pounds with a fabulous body. He had beautiful blonde hair, was a good looking guy, and the ladies loved him. He was also a good performer and a good interview. Unfortunately, Buddy lost his airplane, a great deal of money, his foot, and his wrestling career that night. He lost it all, but being a marine, Buddy overcame it all, and is as happy today as he ever was.

Unfortunately, the crash messed up Dennis McCord for life. I had known Dennis from when we worked in the Carolinas together, and he also wrestled in Australia as Mike McCord, which is where I really got to know him. He was able to recover and continue wrestling, but was forever mentally tormented by that night. I will always have a special bond with him, though, and I even named my first son, Jason Dennis, after him.

Bobby Shane, God love him, was finished on this earth. Even though he had only been in the business for eleven years, he made quite a name for himself and has left behind a great legacy. His early, untimely death is all the more tragic because he had such a tremendous career in front of him, given the fact that he had just gotten his very first booking job in the states.

I was very depressed over his death, and had tremendous feelings of guilt for not finding him. One of the things that really compounded my guilt was that I had been holding some animosity towards him for when he was seemingly taking Jerry Jarrett's side in Georgia. Looking back, I now realize that he was only trying to help. The other thing that I agonized about was the fact that I switched seats with him to have more leg room. Yes, I know that I unlatched my seat belt and that was how I survived – but who knows? Maybe if I had stayed in my seat and my legs were up against Buddy's chair – I wouldn't have been able to clear the plane – and Bobby would have.

Those two things – the grudge I was holding and the fact that we switched seats - really affected me after the crash, added to my remorse, and tormented me for quite some time.

Bobby's parents were kind enough to come and visit me. They knew how guilty I felt, got the coroner's report, and showed it to me, stressing, "Gary, even if you had found him, he would already have been dead. He only had a tiny bit of water in his lungs."

No matter how hard I wanted to believe that Bobby found his own light that night, what happened was, as we went in the bay, Bobby hit his head on the inside of the plane - and that killed him instantly. As time went by, the knowledge that Bobby died on impact did ease the pain a bit, but it was still very difficult.

I eventually talked to my good friend Don Jardine about my grief, and he told me that no one could have done more than I had, and that I shouldn't feel guilty. He said, "I wasn't surprised that you were the one who saved them, because you have very strong will power and a very strong mind – but don't ever feel guilty, because if it wasn't for you, maybe Buddy and Dennis wouldn't be alive."

Don's words were very comforting to me, but I suffered from "survivor guilt" for a long time. It was very hard for me. Dealing with Bobby's death was harder than the crash and the swim to shore. It was overwhelming.

When I think about that night, I wonder how I survived. It's amazing that I did everything I did: Swimming, getting Dennis, getting Buddy, trying to find Bobby, climbing the ladder, dropping the boat, and kicking on the door - all the while with broken bones. I was truly at



death's door, and for a long while that realization messed me up, as well. However, I survived, and I'm just thankful that I made it through and that I can walk around, enjoy my life, and do the things that I do now.

People tell me I'm a hero, but I don't want to hear that, and don't see myself that way. I see myself as someone who God gave the strength to get out of a horrible situation. I never attributed that to me. I attribute that to God and a higher power.

It was hard to keep that story quiet, because there were articles and pictures about the plane crash and of us in our hospital rooms all throughout Florida. I really had to live the hero image down to maintain my "Playboy" Gary Hart persona, and that took a while. Stories began spreading about that night, and to this day there are so many rumors about the crash that many people have heard distorted tales. One lore, for example, is that the bay was infested with sharks. If there had been sharks in the water that night – with all the blood we lost – we would have been eaten up. Now, I would love to tell you how I had to fight off the sharks that night – but it just isn't true. I don't know why people make stuff up about the crash...the truth is horrific enough.

Oddly enough, I never suffered from any type of fear of flying after that, and got on airplanes with no problem. If I did get anything from that experience, though, it was a new perspective on life: To live every day like it's my last, to spend time with the people that I care about, to let them know I care about them, and most importantly, to laugh and have a good time. The true way to happiness is through laughter, because laughter brings love and happiness.

Since the crash, I've tried to stay as true to those as possible, so in that sense, the crash was, to me, a rebirth.

## Chapter 22: Georgia On My Mind

One day during my convalescence, Jack Brisco stopped by my apartment, and my wife told him I was out by the complex pool. She told him that she would get me, because she was smart enough to know that Jack and I couldn't be seen together in public, but he told her that he didn't mind, and that he would go out himself. That was a bold thing to do back in the day. He found me, and after talking for a bit, he asked me what my future plans were. I told him that Fritz offered to bring me home to Dallas where I could assist Red Bastien in the booking office, and that Bill Watts wanted me to go to Oklahoma and be his assistant, as well.

Then, Jack, who owned a part of Georgia, asked if I would consider returning to Georgia Championship Wrestling as the booker.

A lot had happened in Georgia since I left. For starters, Jerry Jarrett's reign as booker was over. Jim Barnett quickly realized that Jerry's talent connections weren't any good, and that he was nothing more than a hillbilly bastard. More importantly, though, was that the war with Ann Gunkel was over. Jim Barnett bought her out for \$250,000, and now ran all of Georgia. A provision in that deal, however, was that her booker, Tom Renesto, would be guaranteed the job of booker in Jim's promotion for three years. Georgia promoters like Fred Ward and Ralph Freed still resented Tom for bailing on them a few years ago, and it infuriated them that Jim made a deal where Tom couldn't be fired. Fred, Ralph, and some other Georgia promoters outright refused to deal with Tom, so Jim had to bring someone else in to serve as the real booker - and that someone was me.

Because of the deal that was made between Jim Barnett and Ann Gunkel, Tom Renesto had the title of booker, but he was actually serving as my assistant. Even though Tom had more experience as a booker than I did at the time, I really had Jim Barnett's trust because of the success that we had together in Australia, and also because I was heavily involved in the booking of Florida during the boom of 1974 when I was serving as Bill Watt's assistant.

When I started in Georgia in April of 1975, it was exactly eight weeks from the day I crashed in the bay, and I still had a cast on my hand and a back brace on. In addition to booking all of the cards in Georgia, I was responsible for producing the two hour Saturday night shows on WTCG - which was the original name of TBS - and stood for Turner Communications Group. I really enjoyed producing those shows, and I'm sure Ted Turner liked my work, too, because for the year I booked the territory, Georgia Championship Wrestling was the #1 rated program on his station. I became so focused and consumed with my job that even after the shows were over, I would replay everything in my head so much that when I lay down and tried to go to sleep, my head would be hurting. It's funny. I was surprised that booking a territory was so easy, but in retrospect, I shouldn't have been, because I had been very well prepared. I learned how to book by carefully watching Bill Watts and Jim Barnett work their craft - and who better to learn from than them?

Serving as Jim Barnett's booker was a real trip, because he was so politically connected in Georgia. It would not be uncommon for me to get a phone call in the office from Governor

Busbee's secretary, leaving a message as to which door they would meet Jim at the Capitol, and I would regularly see cars pull up with government plates on it to pick him up. I also saw him sitting on the dais at Jimmy Carter's Presidential inaugural. He was at the Nixon inaugural, as well, but once Nixon got into all his trouble that picture came off the wall. Eventually, Governor Busbee appointed Jim to the Board of Pardons and Parole, and President Carter named him to the National Arts Council.

Here's what I loved most about Jim Barnett: He could spend his afternoon hanging out in the dressing room with a bunch of wrestlers telling dirty jokes, and then go to an elegant dinner that night with the Governor of Georgia, the President of the United States, and the Prime Minister of Australia - and be completely appropriate for both of those environments. He could be the most vulgar or the most intellectual one in the room - whatever the situation called for - but he was always the wittiest. If there was ever a renaissance man in wrestling, it was Jim Barnett.

He was a true bon vivant, and a real lover of literature and art. He invested in companies like AT&T and NCR when he was a young man, and he played the stock market well. I don't care what anyone says - Jim Barnett was not poor. Also, I had a 12<sup>th</sup> grade education, he had a college education, and he never at any time made me feel insecure about my intelligence or my ideas. He accepted me at face value and always listened to what I had to offer. The only other promoter in Jim's class was Vince McMahon. They were the two classiest guys in wrestling, and knew the business better than anyone - neither of them ever having had a match in their life.

There are people who have said some really harsh, untrue things about Jim Barnett, but I tell you this from the bottom of my heart: He was a great man. I get really offended that when people can't get anything on Jim, they bring his lifestyle up, and try to portray him as a predator. Jim was a homosexual, and he never hid that fact. At the same time, he never hit on any wrestler, and anyone who tells you he did is lying. I would know, because I worked for Jim for over twenty years. Jim's lover was Lonnie Winters, whom out of respect I have been referring to as Jim's personal secretary, which he was, but he was also Jim's partner for thirty years. Jim might have cheated on Lonnie and had affairs in Hong Kong, but he never messed around with wrestlers, and anyone who says that he did is a liar. The furthest thing on Jim Barnett's mind was the desire to have sex with some muscle bound, hairy-assed wrestler.

The Tommy Rich rumor is ridiculous. Tommy Rich got the NWA World Title because he was an extremely good worker from the south, and because the fans loved him and packed the arenas to see him. It's that simple. Tommy Rich put asses in the seats. No wrestler ever sold a seat by letting a promoter have his way with him, and to suggest anything else is utterly ludicrous.

Unfortunately, there were a lot of homophobic guys in wrestling who couldn't accept that a homosexual was in charge. They would make snide remarks and call him a "faggot" behind his back, but "Mr. Barnett" to his face. I wrote those guys off and knew what they were: Gutless cheap-shot artists.

Jim is dead and gone now, and he can't defend himself from the accusations, but he wouldn't have bothered, anyway. If you noticed, he never responded to them when he was alive, because he didn't care what anyone thought about him, and knew it was all lies. The people that loved him, like me, knew they were lies, too - and now you do, as well.

Every Friday night before our show at the Atlanta Auditorium, Jim Barnett would gather the entire crew into the dressing room for a weekly meeting. He would talk about the direction of the company, comment if business was doing good or bad, hype upcoming shows, welcome new talent, and congratulate anyone who had gotten over really good. Then, he would open the floor for comments. Jim made it a completely open environment, and encouraged all of us to say anything we wanted without retribution. If someone was unhappy in Georgia, that was the time to say it. If they didn't like the angle they were in, if they felt they weren't getting the push they deserved and were doing too many jobs, or if someone had a personal issue with someone else in the company - it was to be discussed during Jim's meetings. By creating that type of atmosphere, Jim cut down a lot of trouble, and kept politics out of the dressing room. Also, Jim truly wanted to know everyone's feelings and valued their input, so it wasn't like the guys complained and nothing was done.

I really enjoyed working with Tom Renesto, even though a lot of guys warned me to watch out for him. They told me he was a backstabber, that he would be very jealous of any success that I had, and that he would try to sabotage me. His reputation was marred from when he had jumped from ABC Booking to All South with Ann Gunkel, and nobody trusted him. However, I opted to give him the benefit of the doubt, and I'm glad I did, because Tom didn't seem to be interested in sabotaging me at all. It was actually quite the opposite. Tom stood by me one-hundred percent and actually watched out for me. When I would do and say things that were politically incorrect, Tom would always caution me, "Kid, take it easy. There are a lot of stooges around here."

He would also warn me, "Don't be so open about how you feel. You're getting too much heat on yourself."

What I remember most about working with Tom is that he would always start off presenting his ideas with, "At the risk of losing my job..."

His other big quote - and he could be referring to anyone - was, "Let's try to placate him."

One of the biggest assets to the promotion was the commentator, Gordon Solie, who was by far the best announcer I ever worked with. We would meet before each television taping, and he would always ask how I wanted him to handle specific angles. Without fail, he would get every story across just the way I wanted it told, and would lay it out perfectly. Gordon was wonderful to work with, and I loved him to death. Freddie Miller was the other announcer we used. He was one of those hyper energetic type guys, and had all kinds of wacky ideas that he wanted us to use. Freddie had worked in the office - dealing with the local radio and newspaper - and basically fell into the announcing spot for our syndicated show - The Best of Georgia Championship Wrestling - that we started during my tenure there. Gordon Solie was making

\$500 a week plus a round trip ticket from Florida and a free hotel room to announce the two-hour TCG show on Saturday. When we started doing the “Best of” show, Gordon wanted an additional \$500 plus another round-trip ticket and hotel room to fly in during the week to announce that one, so Freddie got the syndicated announcing gig by default.

As I discussed in a previous chapter - wrestling from Tennessee had a negative connotation, and as soon as word got out that someone from Tennessee was booking for Jim Barnett, no quality wrestlers wanted to come to Georgia and do those God-awful Tennessee finishes. Therefore, having Jerry Jarrett as the booker of Georgia Championship Wrestling had actually hurt the reputation of the promotion! So thanks to Jerry Jarrett, not only did I have to build up the talent pool in Georgia, but I also had to assure guys that Georgia Championship Wrestling was a quality territory again. Actually, there were a couple of guys considered “Tennessee talent” who Jerry Jarrett had brought in that I kept on. One was Ronnie Garvin, and the other was Jerry Lawler. Jerry, in particular, had really gotten over in Georgia, and Jim Barnett was very high on him. I had to agree with Jim, and felt that Jerry was a remarkable piece of talent stuck in a horrible territory. Jim was actually trying to rescue Jerry from Tennessee and get him secured in Roy Shire’s promotion in San Francisco. San Francisco was a big bump-taking territory, and since Jerry Lawler was a great bump-taker and a terrific high-spot worker – Jim thought he would be perfect out there. For whatever reason, that plan never worked out, and Jerry returned to Tennessee, where as far as I’m concerned, he was the only rose out of that briar patch of hillbillies.

In order to properly rebuild the territory, I knew I needed to recruit fresh, new wrestlers, so I brought in Bobby Duncum, Bob Backlund, Dick Slater, Dominic DeNucci, and Dennis McCord – all of whom had been with me in Florida. This was actually Dennis’s return to the ring since the plane crash, and I was very happy to hire him. Unfortunately, he was still messed up pretty bad, because the crash literally took off the bottom of his feet. I also recruited guys like Nikolai Volkoff, “Crazy” Luke Graham, Greg Valentine, Moondog Mayne, Ox Baker, Ron Bass, and the tag team of Tony Garea and Dean Ho. For special cards, I would bring in established names like Andre the Giant, Harley Race, The Sheik, Bobo Brazil, and the Fabulous Moolah.

At the time, Rip Hawk had a lot of heat on him because he had recently left the NWA to work for Eddie Einhorn’s IWA – which was considered an outlaw promotion. Even though there were a lot of people who didn’t want me to hire him, I always appreciated how he got me booked in the Carolinas after I was fired in Australia, so I happily brought him in. Brute Bernard was another big name that I brought into Georgia, because we had a long history together and were good friends.

As I mentioned, I brought Dick Slater in, and as soon as I did I put him in a tag team with Bob Orton. Bob’s father was a legendary wrestler, and along with Mike Graham, was really the first of the second generation guys. Dick and Bob got a few good wins on TV, and with me as their manager, got over pretty good. At the time, the Georgia Tag Team Champions were Bob Armstrong and Robert Fuller. If you remember, Robert Fuller had threatened me in the dressing room during my last run in Georgia, so the fact that I made them tag team champions should show you what kind of businessman I was. I never allowed my personal feelings to interfere if a wrestler was essential to a program. Once Dick and Bob were established as a solid team, I

booked them against the champions all throughout Georgia, and had the champions win in every town. Then, I put the match on TV, and had Dick and Bob win the title. From there, we were off and running, and in every city I booked their rematch in, business was hot. Bob Orton and Dick Slater were fabulous together, and were so important in my career. They became a legendary tag team, teaming in other territories and winning numerous titles together. I'm really proud of both of them, and especially of the fact that I first paired them up.

I also brought Rick Martel in from Florida. Rick was very young and inexperienced – with only about two years under his belt - but I gave him a nice position, and was very happy to have him on my crew. One day, I was sitting in the office when Rick busted through the front door, ignored me, and went straight into Jim Barnett's office. Two minutes later, Jim buzzed me over the intercom and asked me to come into his office to join them. As I entered Jim's office, Rick was sitting on the couch with an angry look on his face, and Jim was calmly sitting at his desk. Jim just looked at me and said, "Fire him."

To say the least, I was perplexed, and asked, "Fire who?"

"There are only two of us in the room," Jim snapped. "Fire Rick!"

I looked at Rick and softly said, "I'm sorry, Rick, but I have to let you go."

Rick's face went from anger to a look of sheer confusion. He then quietly got up and left. At that point, Jim explained to me what had just transpired. Apparently, Rick told Jim that he was "being taken advantage of" and deserved "more money" - and then added that if he didn't get more money, he "would leave." Needless to say, no one ever gave Jim Barnett an ultimatum.

I immediately left the office, found Rick, and asked him why he would barge into Jim Barnett's office demanding more money. He told me that some of the boys were putting stuff in his head, but true to the wrestler's code, he wouldn't stooge on who the rebel-rousers were. I told him flat-out, "Rick, whoever they are – they just messed your career up. You're going to suffer until Jim Barnett forgives you, because if anyone talks to Jim and asks what he thinks about you, the first thing out of his mouth will be, 'I found him very difficult.' I'm sure he'll say that you have potential, but the first word he'll use to describe you will be 'difficult.'"

To say I was upset would be an understatement. Rick was something really special in the ring, yet he allowed himself to be riled up enough to go in and tell Jim Barnett that he deserved more money. I wished that he would have come to me before barging into Jim's office, but he was a young kid, and whoever was in his ear obviously did a number on him. The crazy thing was, he couldn't have been further off the mark. Not only was I truly invested in developing his career, but Rick's apartment was right next to mine, so my wife would make us breakfast every morning! Think about that. Rick got to spend quality time with the booker every morning while the booker's wife cooked them breakfast. How much of a better deal could he have than that? Unfortunately, because of jealous dressing room politicians and backseat lawyers who fed his head with lies, he lost his job.

I realized it was a rookie mistake and felt bad that he lost his job, so I called up Fritz Von Erich and got Rick booked in Dallas. Once I had Rick taken care of, I turned into Colombo - determined to find out who riled him up. There was a guy who worked in the office named Charlie Harben. He was the guy who would go to the shows, handle any situations with the building manager, and pick up the money at the end of the night. He also took care of the rides by lining them up for the boys, and he would keep records of who traveled to each town with whom. Even though the trips were short in Georgia, guys could spend an hour-and-a-half in a car together, and a lot of talking gets done in cars. I asked Charlie to go back a month and tell me who Rick Martel had been riding with. As I looked at the list, the obvious jumped out at me: It was the same names that were constantly in the car with Rick. And for what it's worth - they were all underneath guys, and not names that anyone would recognize today. I asked Charlie to call those specific guys up and have them meet me in my office. When they arrived, I asked them, "Boys, you aren't happy here, are you?"

They immediately all started telling me how happy they were. I took a gamble and said, "Well that's not what I hear. I heard you convinced Rick Martel that he was being taken advantage of and was underpaid."

At that moment they all started pointing fingers and began squealing on each other, each one claiming it was "the other guy" who said it to Rick. My investigation paid off. I fired them all on the spot, and told them to go get a job with an outlaw promotion, because that's where they belonged. My parting shot to them was, "You tell your friends that Gary Hart doesn't play games, and that he doesn't like dressing room politicians or backseat lawyers."

Dressing room politicians are so counterproductive. Rather than sitting around thinking how they can improve their match and rise up the card, they would rather sit around and jealously talk about everyone and rile up other people. Rick Martel wasn't the only one who Jim made me fire, though. One night, during our Friday night meeting at the Atlanta Auditorium, Dick Slater had a Panama hat on, and Jim Barnett asked if he could try it on. Dick obliged, and when Jim put it on, it fell over his ears. Jim sighed, "Oh, it's too big. I wish I could make it fit."

At that moment, Moondog Mayne piped up, "Hey, Jim, if you put your head in the door I'll slam it a couple of times. That'll swell your head up so the hat can fit."

Jim just glared at him and sarcastically said, "Oh, how clever you are Moondog."

Later that evening, Jim walked over to me, pointed at Moondog Mayne, and said, "Fire him." \_

Vince McMahon sent in a couple of his guys who were getting stale in New York - Chief Jay Strongbow and Mr. Fuji - in the hopes that they would get over in Georgia. I had Professor Tanaka on my crew and knew him since Amarillo, really liked him, and felt he was a good guy and was very dependable, so I put him together with Mr. Fuji. I soon learned that Fuji was the exact opposite of Tanaka. Mr. Fuji has no moral center at all, and is the most unscrupulous guy I have ever met in wrestling. He has no redeeming qualities at all, is a trouble maker, and just wants to pull ribs on people. Meanwhile, he has five different wives, kids everywhere, and takes

care of none of them. As soon as he got to Georgia, he and Professor Tanaka opened up a seafood restaurant in Clayton, and the business flopped. Then, one day, it just “happened” to burn down. I was sure that Fuji torched the place, and I was so tired of his games in the dressing room that I told him I couldn’t deal with him anymore and let him go.

Jay Strongbow thought he was something really special in wrestling. When he wrestled under his real name of Joe Scarpa, he was nothing more than a mid-card wrestler, but when Vince McMahon gave him the gimmick of an Indian, he got a tremendously big head. He came into Georgia and felt he could dictate his own angles, completely ignoring the fact that I was the booker. One night at the Atlanta Auditorium, I was in the dressing room while he was in the ring, and I heard all this commotion going on. When I walked out to see what was happening, I saw Chief Jay Strongbow beating up five of my heels with a war club. I waited for him to get back to the dressing room, and as soon as he walked through the door I said, “Scarpa, you’re fired!”

That was one of the few times I had a real argument with Tom Renesto, because he and Jay were good friends. I told Tom, “I don’t care if he’s your friend. He’s a troublemaker - and I have to do what’s right for business, and Jay Strongbow making my heels look weak is not right for business!”

Thunderbolt Patterson was also in Georgia at the time, but he was angry that I was the booker and he wasn’t. I had known Thunderbolt since Amarillo and we had made a lot of money together in the Carolinas. Not only that - but he had been at my house for dinner and slept over at my place a couple of times. Now – simply because I was the boss - I was the enemy.

At the time, Thunderbolt was palling around with a redneck ne’er-do-well named Jim Wilson - a penny-anty, never-was wrestler, who was a nobody in his football career and a nobody in his wrestling career. He had a huge chip on his shoulder because he was nothing more than a face in the crowd - and that’s all he ever could be. He likes to crow about how he ran a “competing” promotion against Georgia Championship Wrestling while I was the booker. I hate to break it to him, but we didn’t even know he was there until he started handing out flyers in front of our shows. He thinks we were so threatened by his rinky-dink promotion that we killed his dog in order to scare him off! I mean – c’mon! He’s delusional. If he was drawing 250 people to his shows he was lucky – and we couldn’t have cared less. Then, when he ran in the Omni and couldn’t draw a dime, he accused the Omni management of locking the doors so people couldn’t get into his show. Puh-leeze. That doesn’t make any sense whatsoever. Jim Wilson is a pathological liar and a clearly incompetent “promoter,” and you would have to be deaf, dumb, and blind to believe anything he says.

Speaking of the Omni, on August 29, 1975, I booked my first sellout at that building. I brought in Dusty Rhodes and Jack Brisco from Florida, Bill Watts from Oklahoma, and really beefed up the card. After the final match, I made a special point to thank Jack for offering me the position as Georgia booker, and also for his support while I was recovering from the crash. It meant so much to me when he told me how happy he was for my success in Georgia. I then went to Bill Watts and thanked him for all his help and preparation in getting me ready for my first booking job. Then, of course, I thanked Dusty. We hugged each other, and were legitimately misty eyed that night. He was thrilled for me, and I was so happy and proud that Jack, Bill,



Dusty, and Jim Barnett were there. I may have booked the show and had a hand in the sellout, but the guys that drew the house were my boys, and I was with all the right people - my friends. I couldn't have been happier. After that, I gained a lot of recognition for my ability to pack arenas, and selling out the Omni became no big thing.

That year, I also booked the very first Thanksgiving night show at the Omni – something that would go on to become an annual tradition. Anytime there was an opportunity to schedule a Thanksgiving show in a big building, I knew it would do great business. Not only because Thanksgiving was traditionally a good night for wrestling, but because I had spent many Thanksgivings in my youth sitting around and eating until I wanted to get out of the house and do something. I knew there would be a whole lot of people out there like me looking for something to do Thanksgiving night – and what better event to attend than wrestling at the Omni?

On October 4, 1975, the wrestling community suffered its second major plane crash in history. Ironically, both crashes were in 1975, and to this day, thankfully, they remain the only two. On that October day, wrestlers Johnny Valentine, Ric Flair, David Crockett, Tim Woods, and Bob Bruggers, as well as their pilot Mike Farkas, went down in the Carolinas. Hearing that fellow wrestlers went down in a plane crash was a very personal thing to me, so as soon as I heard the news, I immediately got in touch with the Crockett's, because I knew David from when I worked for his father. I had never met Tim, Ric, or Bob, but I did make personal contact and wished them well. I also spoke with Johnny's son, Greg Valentine to see how his father was doing, and when I learned that he was paralyzed, I was devastated. I immediately called Johnny to let him know how sorry I was, but really, what can one say in a situation like that?

## Chapter 23: Mark Lewin and Don Jardine

During my time in Georgia I received some really great booking advice from Bobby Bruns. He was one of the founding members of the National Wrestling Alliance, and was the booker for St. Louis at the time. He came into Georgia for a week and we really got to know each other well. One evening, he told me, “Kid – the only power you have as a booker is in the people that you hire. Bring in proven commodities, and guys that have drawn money with you, your ideas, and your psychology in the past. Remember - you’re only as good as the crew that you have with you.”

Over the years, he had surrounded himself with guys like Dick the Bruiser, Bill Longston, Lou Thesz, Rip Hawk, Bob Ellis, Sonny Myers, and Fritz Von Erich – so I knew he practiced what he preached. He gave me great advice, and with that in mind I brought in two proven wrestlers who I drew a lot of money with in the past: Mark Lewin and The Spoiler.

I brought The Spoiler in during September 1975 to challenge for Mr. Wrestling II’s Georgia Heavyweight Title. Mr. Wrestling II was a gigantic box office attraction in Georgia, and truly a legendary figure of southern wrestling, much like Bruno Sammartino in New York, Fritz Von Erich in Dallas, and Dusty Rhodes in Florida. Mr. Wrestling II was far better and much more over than the first Mr. Wrestling - Tim Woods - ever dreamed of being, plus he was the Georgia Heavyweight Champion. At the time, wearing a state belt such as the Missouri Title, Texas Title, and Florida Title had great meaning.

To start off his program with The Spoiler, I put The Spoiler’s mask on the line against Mr. Wrestling II’s belt. After a tremendous buildup, The Spoiler won the title. I then began the build for the return match, which was The Spoiler’s title against Mr. Wrestling II’s mask. To the delight of the fans, Mr. Wrestling II regained the title. Then, I booked a sixty-minute mask vs. mask match in Atlanta, wherein the title wouldn’t be on the line, but the loser was to unmask. Mr. Wrestling II and The Spoiler wrestled for sixty minutes straight, and put on an unbelievably exciting match. After the time limit expired, Mr. Wrestling II challenged The Spoiler to continue, and although The Spoiler wanted to, I wouldn’t allow him to. Since the stipulation was that whoever lost had to unmask - and there was no loser – neither of them unmasked!

Booking a finish like that is something that few matchmakers would have the balls to do. It wasn’t a bait and switch, because it was never advertised that there “had” to be a winner - and I’m not being glib when I say that. We also didn’t jip the people, because believe me when I tell you - they saw a thrilling sixty-minute match, and were very satisfied when they left the arena that night. The finish didn’t hurt The Spoiler’s or Mr. Wrestling II’s credibility, either. If anything, it only made the two of them more legendary in the fans eyes since they both wanted to continue, but I prevented it. Most importantly, the finish didn’t hurt the town, because their feud did tremendous business in Atlanta – and all throughout Georgia - for the next three months. Actually, the Mr. Wrestling II vs. The Spoiler feud was one of the best businesses I ever did for a singles run. I’m very proud that I pulled that particular finish off. It wasn’t easy to do, it had to be done just right, and I took it very seriously.

Mark Lewin came into Georgia as a babyface in December 1975. He was a master of the sleeper, and knew how to do it legit. On certain nights, he would go out to the ring, hold his hand out to the audience and declare, "If you hurt, come to me, and I'll make you feel better."

He would then pick three fans out of the audience and bring them into the ring. He would talk to them, hold their hand, ask them if they had any medical problems or if they were taking medication, check their pulse, and then put them to sleep for an instant. After about nine seconds, he would wake them up, and Freddie Miller would be standing there with a microphone ready to get their reaction when they awoke. Their first comment would sometimes include profanity, because they were coming out of a sleep and just saying the first thing that came to their mind. I remember one time in Columbus, Georgia, a long-haired hippy guy woke up and marveled, "Wow! What a trip that was!"

Don Jardine, Mark Lewin, and I were thrilled to be together in Georgia. We were best of friends, we all got along great, and we made a lot of money together. A lot of people assume that wrestlers are a bunch of back stabbers and liars looking to screw everyone around them, and while some of them are, I made sure to surround myself with different types of guys. Mark and Don were my friends, and they were very protective of me. After the plane crash I backed off from wrestling on a regular basis and stopped taking bumps like I had in the past. Anytime anyone tried to touch me, Mark and Don would yell, "Hey! Watch it! That guy just survived a plane crash!"

Even though I was the booker, I liked to consider myself more of a "leader" than a "boss." As much as I admired Bill Watts – I never wanted to be that type of booker. That wasn't me. Bookers like Bill Watts and Ole Anderson were aggressive guys - but I wasn't. I was more laid back and mellow, and figured I could get more from my crew if I picked the right ones and got them to trust my judgment. I saw myself as a fatherly, Uncle Gary type of booker. I knew I was the boss and the boys knew I was the boss - so why should I try to act like the boss? It would seem a bit silly. Besides, I really admired my boss Jim Barnett's management style. He was never domineering or wanting to be in charge all the time, so I guess I adopted the "Top Down" management style, and treated my crew the same way Jim treated me: With respect.

One of the greatest compliments I ever received was from Pat O'Connor. He came to Georgia for a week, and as I was taking him back to the airport, he commented, "You know, if I didn't know for a fact you were the booker, I never would have guessed it. You seem like one of the boys."

I was grinning ear to ear as I replied, "That's what I try to be."

At the same time, Tom Renesto had to point out to me, "You're not one of the boys anymore. You're the boss."

That was a very hard transition for me, and it took me some time to learn how to walk that fine line. At times, Mark and Don would assume they could do anything they wanted because their buddy Gary was the booker, and I would have to remind them that, friendship aside, I had to do what's right for business. They understood that, and respected me for it. Even

though I was their friend 24/7, I still had responsibilities to the office, and had to run the company and keep it profitable. That way, in the end, we could all make more money. I never lost sight of that. It wasn't about fame or glory to me - it was about how much money me and my crew will have at the end of the week to feed our families and buy the stuff that makes us happy. That's what I was there for. As Mark would say, "When you can make money with your friends, that's the best kind of money there is."

Over time, I learned how to be the boss when I had to be. For instance, I would put my foot down whenever Don and Mark wanted to discuss what went on in the office, and I would tell them that "what happens in the office stays in the office." I was good at keeping things private, and never had a need to let on that I was "in-the-know." I was smart enough to know that if I were to tell Mark and Don all the "dirt," that would only add to rumor, innuendo, and fodder - and cause trouble. If I were to mention, for instance, that I was thinking of putting the tag titles on Bob Orton and Dick Slater, everyone would question why I was doing that. I subscribed to the "need to know" basis. If I needed to tell you something, I would tell you. Also, if I said things that didn't happen, I would lose my credibility. I always wanted to maintain my credibility so that when I told someone something, they knew it would happen.

Abdullah the Butcher was also on my crew. I had known Abdullah since 1963, when he was wrestling under his real name, Larry Shreeve. Back then, he had a karate gimmick, and believe it or not - he was quite good at karate. With The Spoiler, Mark Lewin, Abdullah the Butcher, and the tag team of Dick Slater and Bob Orton, I had four layers of content, and was really stacking the cards. I learned that from Jim Barnett and Bill Watts - to load up the undercards to get the most business as possible.

I love Abdullah to death, but booking him was never easy. For starters - he didn't like to lose. One time I had to get pretty creative - and sneaky - to get him to do the right thing. After he had a good run with Jerry Brisco, I booked Abby in a hot program with Mark Lewin, and it was imperative that Mark went over to finish it off. I told Abby I was booking him and Mark in a 2/3 falls match, where Mark would put him to sleep for the first fall, and then told him that he could use a fork during the second fall. Using a fork on his opponent is Abby's favorite thing to do, and he uses in every one of his matches - so he was thrilled. Then, I told Abby that just before the third fall, he would attack Mark with the fork again, and since Mark wouldn't be able to continue, the match would be over. Butchie just loved that, and he really wanted to tear the place apart. The night of the match, we went to the ring, and the first fall went seven minutes. Mark put the sleeper on, and Abdullah fell asleep. Then, I went in the ring and worked Abdullah's back and neck, popped him, and woke him up. Butchie turned around and noticed that Mark had gone back to the dressing room. He looked at me confused and asked, "Where's Mark?"

"You're the mark," I replied. "He's gone back to the dressing room. This was a one fall match."

After his feud with Abdullah, Mark Lewin got involved in a really heated program with The Spoiler, and one night in Columbus, Mark asked the referee, Leon Ogle, to get involved in the finish. Leon was the son-in-law of Columbus and Macon promoter Fred Ward, and was

actually married to the fat girl that Bill Watts made the comment about that got him fired. Anyways, Leon got so excited about being involved in the finish that he asked to be bladed, and even requested that a scar be left. I started explaining that his involvement wouldn't require getting a scar, but he didn't want to hear it, and insisted on getting one so he could show it off to all his friends.

I asked Don not to cut Leon too deep, but when the time came during the match, Don accidentally sliced a vein, and blood was literally shooting out of Leon's forehead. Leon - that goofy nut - loved it, even though he had to be rushed to the hospital. Fred Ward wasn't so happy, however, and demanded to know why Leon was cut up so badly and had to be sent to the hospital. I tried explaining that Leon wanted a scar so he could strut all over town with it and show it off - but it was of no use, and from that moment on, Fred Ward had it in for me...big-time.

About a week later, Jim called me into his office and told me that he had just received a phone call from Ralph Freed. Ralph was another son-in-law of Fred's, and he served as Fred's right hand man. Ralph had apparently told Jim that he saw Dick Slater and Bob Orton smoking marijuana in the back of the Columbus Coliseum after the matches the previous night. I told Jim that there was no way Ralph saw Bob or Dick smoking marijuana behind the Coliseum after the matches, because I was with them after the matches and we went right out to the car and left. Jim was relieved to hear what I said, but felt that we should all sit down and talk about it, because Fred Ward was very upset over this accusation. The following week, we went to Columbus for the next show, and all six of us sat down: Bob Orton, Dick Slater, Jim Barnett, Fred Ward, Ralph Freed, and I. Jim started the meeting off saying, "There seems to be a disconnect. Ralph told me that he saw Dick and Bob in the back of the arena smoking dope after last weeks show, but according to Gary, they all left together as soon as the show was over."

Fred Ward rolled his eyes and sneered, "I put a lot more stock in Ralph's word than Gary Hart's."

Bob was real angry that this was all going on to begin with, and as soon as Fred said that, Bob yelled, "You fat piece of crap! I come from a wrestling family, and if this rumor that you're starting gets back to my dad, I'll kick your ass!"

The meeting disintegrated from there, and was basically over before it started. The accusation was eventually dropped, but Dick, Bob, and I were no longer welcome in Columbus or Macon. Since I was no longer welcome there, Tom Renesto took over booking responsibilities for those towns. Keep in mind that when I was originally hired, it was because promoters like Fred Ward hated Tom so much that they didn't want him near their towns. Now, it was at the point where Fred preferred Tom over me!

That was bad.

Not long after that, Jack Brisco and Bill Watts came to Georgia for a few shows. While they were there, I asked them to grade me on my first booking experience. They both agreed that on TV production, matchmaking, putting asses in the seats, and developing talent, I got an A+,

but on politics, they gave me a lowly F. They were obviously referring to my getting banned from Fred Ward's towns. Bill then added, in all seriousness, "Don't worry. Over time, you'll become as good a politician as I am."

This was coming from the successful politician who was fired for insulting Fred Ward's daughter!

One day, Jim Barnett called me into his office and told me that he had received a phone call from Ted Turner. Ted told Jim that there was to be no more blood on TCG – under any circumstances. Ted was specifically fed up with Abdullah the Butcher - but what could he expect from Abdullah? Blood is how he establishes himself, blood is how he stays over, and blood is what the fans want from him. I understood Ted's edict, though. Even though wrestling got Ted Turner good ratings, blood brought too many complaints from advertisers, and he didn't want to hear it anymore. When Jim told me of the new rule, I assured him he wouldn't have to worry about a thing.

As I mentioned earlier, Mark Lewin and The Spoiler were involved in a great program. In my day, we called a good, long feud a "program." Today it's called a "storyline." Whatever you want to call it is fine by me, but I was building up to a sleeper vs. claw match between them, and wanted to do something big on TV to really hype their upcoming match at the Omni. When Mark, Don, and I were coming up with a great angle to air on TCG, I made it clear that there was to be no blood, and that if somebody bled the hard way, TCG producers would censor it and cover up the blood. Don immediately complained, "Well with my claw there has to be blood."

"Don't be like that," I said to Don. "There hasn't been blood every time you've used the claw."

Mark then questioned, "Since when do we let TV people tell us how to run our business?"

It was difficult winning them over, but I assured them that this angle would get over phenomenally without any blood, and they finally agreed to do the angle without blading.

The day we shot the angle for TCG, I took Professor Tanaka, a martial arts "expert," into the ring with me. Tanaka was going to carefully observe Mark Lewin applying the sleeper hold on me in an attempt to prove that Mark's sleeper hold was nothing more than a choke. However, as I turned around for Mark to put the sleeper on me, Tanaka whacked him with a judo chop to the back of his neck, and Mark went down. At that point, The Spoiler rolled under the bottom rope and put the claw on Mark.

So far, the angle was going smoothly and without a hitch. Unbeknownst to me, however, Don, Mark, and Tanaka got together and came up with a way to beat the system and use blood. Here's where the angle we set up took a left turn, and I'll explain it to you exactly as I witnessed it:

After The Spoiler released the claw and backed away, Mark sat straight up, faced the camera, and had blood pouring down his face. Even though I was stunned, I noticed that Tanaka - who was supposed to be in the ring fending off anyone who would try and save Mark - was standing over by Gordon Solie, watching the monitor. Suddenly, Tanaka rolled into the ring and ripped off Mark's pants, leaving him in his underwear.

By that time, I had lost complete control, and just walked away and left them by themselves. They had set me up, and I was so mad that you couldn't even possibly imagine how I felt. They completely went into business for themselves, did whatever they wanted to do, and were determined to get their angle over at any expense. They wanted to get the biggest ratings, draw the largest houses, make the most money, and be the kings of Georgia Championship Wrestling. That's fine and all, but when the blood came, I was disgusted with both of them.

When I got to the dressing room, Tom Renesto was shaking his head in disbelief and warned me, "You're going to be in deep trouble. That's some heavy stuff you just pulled out there."

I started to explain that I didn't know they would do that - but stopped. Why bother defending myself? I was the booker, and the buck stopped with me. I knew I was going to be fired, so I just went home and watched it on TV that night. As I saw it on TV, I realized what Tanaka was doing over by Gordon Solie. He was watching the monitor to see when the censors blurred out the blood. As soon as he saw that, he ran in the ring and pulled Mark's pants off, because he knew that the censors - who were blurring the blood in real-time - would switch the joy stick from the blood to the underwear, and since there was no editing, outtakes, or re-shoots - there was only one thing that could be blurred, and they would choose to show the blood. Therefore, blood is what I saw on TV, blood is what the audience saw at home, blood is what Jim Barnett saw, and blood is what Ted Turner saw.

Jim called me the next day and let me know that Ted Turner personally called him to ask who had produced that show on TCG. When Jim gave him my name, Ted Turner said that he didn't want me to produce anything for TCG or appear on TCG ever again, and that he didn't want The Spoiler, Mark Lewin and Professor Tanaka on his station again, either. By then, I was so fed up with Georgia politics and all the nonsense with Fred Ward that I really didn't care that I was fired, and was actually sort of relieved to be let go.

When Don and Mark realized that their stunt got me fired, they felt bad, apologized profusely, and offered to tell Jim that I didn't know anything about it. I told them not to bother, because I was the booker and producer, and at the end of the day, I was responsible for the content of the show.

I wasn't blind to the fact that two of my best friends had just taken advantage of our friendship. When friends take advantage of my good nature, it's pretty hard to accept. I let it slide, though. I guess deep down I felt that they had helped me so much in my career that if I lost a job over something they did - so what. I took the bump for Don and Mark, but I did it because they were my friends. Now, if it had been someone other than my friends, it would have been a completely different story.

My stint as booker in Georgia was a real breakthrough experience for me in wrestling. Most in the business knew me as a manager, as a guy who was good at interviews, and as someone with clever ideas for finishes. After my successful year as booker of Georgia Championship Wrestling, however, people started realizing that I had more to offer, so in that sense, regardless of how it ended, I am forever grateful and proud of my run in Georgia.



## Chapter 24: Return to Dallas

After the crash, Fritz had offered me a job in the Dallas booking office. Even though he made that offer in February 1975, and it was now June 1976, I called him and asked if his offer was still on the table. Fritz told me that Red Bastien was still his booker, but as fate would have it, he was leaving to Minneapolis. Fritz was interested in me coming in to take the book, but wanted to know what I was looking for monetarily. I told him I would think about it and get back to him.

Jim Barnett paid me \$1,000 a week to be his booker – in addition to paying me extremely well to be talent - so I never had any real need in negotiating a booking deal with a promoter. However, because I had had financial problems with Fritz twice before - in 1967 and 1973 - and since I was now going in to be his booker, I wanted to set up a deal that I could live with. I went right to Mark Lewin, who had booked for Jim Barnett in Australia, Steve Rickard in New Zealand, Dory Funk, Sr. in Amarillo, and Stu Hart in Calgary, and asked him what kind of deal I should ask for. Mark advised me to request \$100 a day as the booker - and because it's a seven day a week job, I should make it clear I wanted \$700 a week. Plus, I should ask for whatever I would normally make when I manage or wrestle. On top of that, Mark also told me to ask Fritz what the average is in each town he has, and suggested that we work out a percentage deal based on that. For example, if his average was \$5,000 in Dallas, any time I bring the house up \$1,000, I would get a \$100 bonus. If I bring it up \$2,000, I would get a \$200 bonus. When I asked Fritz to structure our deal that way, he agreed to it. Fritz understood that commission was a great motivational tool, because some bookers could come in, book themselves on top, and just make money off of their position. This would keep me focused on the big picture.

After flying to Dallas, I went to Fritz's house in Lake Dallas, and we sat down for an informal meeting in his living room. Also in the room were his sons - Kevin, David, and Kerry - and even though it had been two-and-a-half years since I last saw them, they still called me Uncle Gary. Fritz briefed me on Red Bastien's tenure as the booker, and explained that he would be staying on as a wrestler for a few weeks after I took the book. That was more than fine with me, because Red was one of my boyhood idols, and, ironically, he had also been trained by Billy Goetz! Fritz also asked if I was comfortable inheriting Bronko Lubich as my assistant. To say I was overjoyed to be working with Bronko would have been an understatement. I was honored, because he was so good. Fritz then warned me of his tenuous relationship with Paul Boesch in Houston. He felt that the rest of his promoters - like Joe Blanchard in San Antonio - were very loyal to the Dallas booking office, but there were still some harsh feelings from when Fritz took the booking office from Paul, and their relationship was not exactly smooth.

Fritz also told me that he wanted to be out of the ring in five years, and was looking for someone to replace him. I wondered aloud, "How can we replace you? You've been on top in Dallas for a long time. That's going to be very difficult."

He then pointed at Kevin, and said that he was interested in getting into wrestling. I can't say I was shocked. The Von Erich kids had always told me that they wanted to wrestle, and it's

the most common thing in the world for sons of wrestlers to want to follow in their fathers' footsteps. I looked at Kevin and asked him, "Is this what you really want?"

Kevin looked me square in the eye and assured me, "Yes it is, Uncle Gary. I want to wrestle."

Then David chimed in, "Yeah! We wanna wrestle!"

"Wait a minute!" Fritz said. "Only Kevin will start wrestling. He's already graduated from college. David and Kerry need to get their diplomas first."

Believe it or not, Fritz had hopes that Kerry would play for the NFL, and that David would have an NBA career. The only reason Kevin couldn't pursue the NFL was because he had bad knees. Fritz wasn't as big on his sons being wrestlers as is perceived, and it certainly wasn't like he drilled it into them that they had to be wrestlers. In any event, it was agreed that night that I would train Kevin, and Fritz would retire from the ring in five years.

As expected, the fans remembered me when I returned, but the reception they gave me was not one that I was used to. On my first night back at the North Side Coliseum, the audience gave me a standing ovation. Apparently, they had heard about the plane crash. As touched as I was by their response, I quickly got my heat back and became hated in no time.

Fritz Von Erich was an icon in Dallas. At the time, he was the American Champion, and I planned to book him in what I refer to as "The Ol' Bruno Sammartino Method." I would present Fritz with big giants, and he would massacre them. I studied other bookers very closely, and I liked the way that Vince McMahon presented his babyface champion with monster heels, so I decided to mirror that in Dallas. I immediately set about looking for my first monster for Fritz to slay, and Ox Baker more than fit the description of a "monster." He's obnoxious, has a booming voice, and is really scary looking. I brought Ox to Dallas not only because I knew he would draw money with Fritz, but also because I knew that he wouldn't mind putting Fritz over and doing the honors when the time came.

For one of their big matches, I needed Ox to bleed while Fritz had the claw on him. However, Ox didn't know how to blade himself, and anytime one of his opponents ever tried to blade him, he would cry over how much it "burned." To help Ox out, I made a blade where he wouldn't have to pull it across his forehead, but instead, he could poke it in. It was more like a sword. I even did it to myself as a demonstration for him. I popped it in and explained that he'll know when he breaks through because he'll hear a crack. Ox understood, and was willing to do it for the match. The night of their match, everything was going great, and when Fritz put the claw on Ox, blood started flowing everywhere. I was scared to death that Ox hit a vein in the center of his forehead, because blood was literally shooting out and pouring down his face. It was gross, and Fritz started screaming, "Somebody get a towel!"

Finally, someone threw the referee a towel, who then wrapped it around Fritz's hand. It turned out that from all of his years in football and wrestling, Fritz would repeatedly break the index finger on his right hand. However, he wouldn't go to the doctor, and just kept taping it up,

so eventually it started to bend crooked and look funny - and went completely numb. Well, Ox had just sliced half of that finger off, and because it was numb - Fritz didn't even know until it was too late! Fritz ran up the aisle with his hand wrapped in the towel so nobody in the arena could tell, and I immediately went to the dressing room, found Fritz, and marveled, "Boy, did Ox get some juice tonight!"

Fritz threw the towel at me and screamed, "Get me a doctor!"

I then started building Ox up to eventually get a shot at NWA Champion Harley Race. When I booked the match for Houston, out of nowhere, promoter Paul Boesch asked, "Gary, I would really like to make their match a title vs. title match. Can you get Fritz to drop the American Title to Ox Baker? That way, I can promote a match between the NWA Champion vs. the American Champion."

Now, I wasn't a paranoid kind of guy who peered around corners and looked under beds, but when Paul said that to me, I thought to myself that it didn't sound logical. What's the difference if Ox is the American Champion or not? Sensing that Paul had an agenda, I then remembered what Fritz had told me about their tenuous relationship, and realized that Paul wanted to take the title off of Fritz in order to devalue him in Houston. I ignored Paul's suggestion, and instead gave Ox a gimmick in which he would take a magic marker out of his boot, draw a circle around his opponent's heart, and hit it. That got him so over as a monster that when his match came up with Harley, they drew the biggest house in Houston up to that point - \$50,000. Ox's gimmick was over big-time in Dallas, but Jose Lothario refused to sell for his heart punch unless Ox taped his hand like a boxer and cheated. I thought that would take away from Ox's heart punch, so I suspended Jose for being difficult and unreasonable, telling him, "Make no mistake about it. I run this territory, and you do what I say or you don't work for me. If Paul Boesch wants you to work in Houston, then he better bring someone in from outside Dallas, because you're not working with my guys."

I also brought Dennis McCord in, who by now had fully healed from the crash we were in. Before he arrived in Dallas, he told me he wanted to bill himself as Often Idle, which I thought was pretty unique. However, when I mentioned that name to Paul Boesch, he told me it was "ridiculous," and that he would refuse to use him in Houston. To ensure Dennis got booked in Houston, I came up with a different yet similar sounding name for him - Austin Idol. Unfortunately, when Dennis arrived to Dallas and found out that I had changed his name - he got upset with me! I overlooked his anger and rationalized that he was still traumatized from the crash, but he was so bothered that I had changed his name that after a couple of months, it was clear we couldn't work together anymore. Exasperated, I got him booked in Portland for Don Owen, and needless to say, he kept the Austin Idol name and ended up doing really good business with it.

Eventually, I also brought in my dear friends The Spoiler and Mark Lewin, regardless of what happened in Georgia - because they were an asset to any territory. And to show you just how "over" the incident in Georgia I was - I even brought in Professor Tanaka - who was just as involved in that scheme as they were! I'd like to mention that just because I hired some of my friends doesn't mean I was the type of booker who would automatically bring all of my buddies

into the territory I was booking. I never had that sickness. Yes, I hired a lot of good friends over the years, but I never elevated them above a position that they could handle, nor did I automatically give them main event positions. When I was running a company – I hate to say this – but I was a company man. I put the company above my own interests, and never stocked a territory with my friends. For example, Sir Oliver Humperdink and Dick Slater never came to Dallas for me. A lot of guys who were associated with me never came to Dallas while I had the book. And it's not that I didn't want to use them, but I already had a good, stable crew of guys – and they had good positions elsewhere.

One friend of mine I would have had no problem bringing into Dallas was King Curtis Iaukea. However, as I said earlier, Curtis was an attraction, and there's a big difference between an attraction and a wrestler. An attraction is not someone that I could long-term program with. Therefore, I knew that if Curtis were to come to Dallas and work every night – after awhile, he would no longer have been an attraction. Plus, during the time I was booking in Dallas, Curtis contacted a blood virus that put him in the hospital for four months - and eventually out of wrestling. Curtis was notorious when it came to blading. A lot of times, if a promoter wasn't first class, he wouldn't have his mats cleaned on a regular basis, because it cost about \$150 per cleaning. So in many territories there would be blood all over the mat, and it would stay there for weeks and weeks - and sometimes turn brown. By traveling around to different towns and slicing himself open on old, dirty, blood-stained mats is how Curtis picked up his virus. I called Curtis several times when he was in the hospital in Tampa, and we never talked about him coming to Dallas – we just talked about him getting better. Unfortunately, he got hepatitis and was never the same. His knees atrophied, and it became very hard for him to walk. That was his demise in wrestling. And even then, had Curtis ever called me up and told me he needed a spot – he would have had one in a New York second.

“Killer” Tim Brooks was in Dallas when I arrived, and he became my rock. He could work on the first match and tear it up or go on last and blow the roof off the place. He was introduced to wrestling through his cousin, Dick Murdoch. Their mothers were sisters, but Dick's mother put Dick up for adoption as soon as he was born because she was quite young. He was, of course, adopted by “The Fabulous Texan” Frankie Hill Murdoch and his wife, because they couldn't have children of their own. Dick's birth mother died shortly after that, so he never really knew her, but he did know her relatives, and became very tight with Tim Brooks. In 1969, Tim had just gotten out of the army, and was hanging out with his cousin, Dick, who was wrestling one night in Odessa. During the card, The Funks told Dick that they needed someone else in the battle royal, so Dick got some scissors, gave Tim a silly haircut, and threw him in the ring – with no training whatsoever. By the time I arrived in Dallas, Tim was so good that he could take care of anyone I booked him with, and always made them look great. He had all the confidence in the world, and never worried about dropping the fall. Anytime I brought in Mil Mascaras, Blue Demon, or El Santo – all legendary wrestlers from Mexico - I always booked them with Tim, because he understood the importance of making others look the way they were supposed to look. A booker always needs someone like that on their crew, so Tim was very important to me – and he's an all-around great guy.

As I mentioned earlier, I was blessed to have inherited Bronko Lubitch as an assistant. He's the most wonderful man you would ever want to meet - honest and true. The first one in the

building on the day of the matches, and the last one to go home. And if somebody needed a ride, Bronko was always there to offer one. Plus, he really knew wrestling. He had been around the business a long time, and he allowed me to use him as a sounding board on a lot of things. Bronko was very good to me, and out of all the assistants that ever worked for me, Bronko was the best. Bronko also served as a referee for the promotion, and he was legendarily slow to get down for a pin-fall. Sometimes he would be so sluggish that he would just count with his foot. Whenever I wanted to work an inside rib on him, I would have the guys do a lot of false finishes right in the middle of the ring so he couldn't use the ropes to get up. They would do five false finishes right in the middle and he would have to get up and down, begging them to do something by the ropes. It was funny to me and the rest of the guys – but not to Bronko!

I do care a lot about Bronko, though, and learned so much from him just by being around him and getting his take on things. Bronko bought RCA and IBM stock way back when, and just on his dividends alone, he never had to worry about money. He was so well off that he bought ten percent of the Dallas office, and even though Bronko was part owner, he never at any time tried to use that to his advantage, and instead of it seeming like I worked for him, it felt like he worked for me. We had a wonderful time together and a great working relationship. Bronko's assistance was invaluable, because there were twelve promoters that I had to deal with on a weekly basis, and I was responsible for producing their shows, bicycling a syndicated tape to them, supplying them with talent, and listening to their petty differences. That was just some of the administrative duties. On the creative end, one of my biggest challenges was coming up with ways to draw money in Fort Worth on Monday and Dallas on Tuesday. Keep in mind that each city is just thirty-two miles apart, so to do big business both nights - every week - demanded a lot of my time and attention.

I also had to focus on training Kevin Von Erich. I contacted Les Thornton and Tony Charles – both of whom had worked for me in Georgia - and asked if they would like to work for me in Dallas. As soon as they arrived, I asked them to assist me in his training. The way Kevin was trained went like this: Kevin would come to the Sportatorium during the week when it was empty and have a ten-minute match with Les. Then, Les and I would talk with Kevin about some of the things he could have done to have made his match better. Right after that, Kevin would have a twenty minute match with Tony, followed by a talk with me and Tony where we would review that match, as well. This went on twice a week for six months. After a couple of weeks, David and Kerry began showing up, and Kevin would invite them in the ring and show them different moves. When that got back to Fritz, he called me up yelling, "Hey! I didn't tell you to train David and Kerry - I told you to train Kevin!"

Fritz was so angry with me that I finally said, "Fine, then you come and train Kevin twice a week and take me out of it."

Of course he quickly backed down, because he didn't want to take on that responsibility. I understood where Fritz was coming from, though, so I told the boys, "Please. You're getting Uncle Gary into trouble. I don't want to have to stooge you off to your dad."

David and Kerry understood and backed off from the ring, but would still come and watch. When I felt it was nearing time for Kevin's first match, I had to choose an opponent for

him. There was a kid in Dallas at the time named Paul Perschman, and when I approached him about being Kevin's first opponent, he was flattered. I booked Kevin and Paul for a ten-minute match at the Sportatorium while no one was there, just so they could get a feel for each other. Tony, Les, and I were the only ones watching, and they had a really good match. There wasn't a doubt in my mind that Kevin was ready, and I knew that he was money in the bank. I then booked Kevin's official debut match in Fort Worth. When Fritz found out, he freaked. He really started panicking, and wanted Kevin to wear a mask. He got so nervous that Kevin started to get nervous! I told Fritz not to bother Kevin anymore and actually barred him from attending Kevin's debut match because he was rattling him so much!

I had our announcer, Dan Coates, advertise the match on KTVT, hyping that Fritz's son, Kevin, would be having his first match ever in Fort Worth. It was publicized so well that the building was packed that night, and the fans fell in love with Kevin instantly. Kevin was handsome, had a body that was ripped, and looked like a movie star. His match with Paul went perfectly, and when I arrived to the office on Tuesday morning, I couldn't have been happier. When Fritz asks me how things went, I earnestly replied, "From the moment Kevin left the dressing room until he got back, he was great."

"C'mon. It was his first match," Fritz said, looking at me like I was a used car salesman. "It couldn't have been 'great.' Maybe okay - but not 'great.'"

I looked at Danny Plechas and said, "Danny, you tell him."

Danny, who was also there that night, confirmed my adulation by saying, "I know you don't want to hear it, Fritz, but the kid was great. If we don't go all the way with him, we're missing the boat."

Of course, we would go all the way with Kevin, and the rest is history. Sometime thereafter, Kevin's first opponent, Paul Perschman, went to work for Don Owen in Portland. And before he left, he asked me if he could use my moniker, "Playboy," in the Pacific Northwest. I really liked the kid, and told him that it wouldn't be a problem at all. Paul went on to change his ring name and have great success as "Playboy" Buddy Rose.

## Chapter 25: Bruiser Brody

As the booker of the Dallas office, I would constantly get phone calls from wrestlers in other territories looking for work. If I couldn't bring them in, my policy was to always be upfront with them and tell them why. For example, I might tell them that my roster was full and suggest that they call me back in three months. That wasn't a blow-off line, either. A lot can change in three months. Someone on the roster can get hurt, suddenly leave the area, or burnout quicker than I had hoped.

In 1976, I received a phone call from a young wrestler named Bruiser Brody. At the time, he was wrestling for the WWWF, but was looking to come into Dallas. I didn't have a spot for him at the time, so I asked him to call me back in three months. Brody was very proactive, because not only did he follow up with me in three months, but he also mailed me some publicity photos of himself standing in front of the Empire State Building. Needless, to say – I was very impressed by both his tenacity and his look.

Brody grew up in Detroit and got a football scholarship to West Texas State, which is where guys like the Funks, Stan Hansen, and Bobby Duncum went. After graduating with a degree in journalism, Brody worked as a reporter for newspapers in Lubbock and Amarillo, and soon fell into wrestling. When he arrived to the Dallas area, I immediately took him under my wing and spent a lot of time helping him develop his character. He had such a great presence about him - and a very different and unique look - that after watching him in a couple of matches, I advised him not to sell for his opponents. I made it clear that there was a big difference in registering – which he should do – and selling – which he shouldn't do. I also pushed him towards a more hardcore style of wrestling, but I didn't do it recklessly. I carefully explained to him that he could seriously injure himself and put himself in danger by wrestling in that style – but I strongly felt that by doing so it would enhance his character and give him even greater presence in the ring.

At the time, the Dallas promotion had the following edicts for non-main event wrestlers: No fighting on the floor, no using chairs, no run-ins, and there was to be a winner and a loser. The reason it was set up that way was because the shows were structured so that the most exciting match was saved for last. However, I allowed Brody to go to the floor and use chairs on his opponents. I actually gave him the right to do anything he wanted to do in order to get his crazy, Wildman character over. Brody was given a lot of freedom and leeway that a lot of other guys weren't, and that leniency did aggravate some of the other guys on my crew. When guys would ask why they couldn't go to the floor while Brody could, my answer was always the same: "Because that's Brody's gimmick."

If Bruiser Brody came off any way other than completely wild and unpredictable, it would have been harmful to his persona. Therefore, I restricted all others on the card from doing anything remotely similar to him. It was his gimmick - and it was sacred. Eventually, Brody was over to the point that I booked him in a feud against Fritz Von Erich. They had some exciting matches, but interestingly enough, I found that it was a match that the people just didn't want to see. Every time they would face off, seven minutes into the match, Fritz would get all blown up,

and it was clear that Brody was dominating him. The fans started to realize that Fritz was on the downside, and due to Brody's hardcore style, they doubted – for the first time ever - that Fritz could prevail. A good booker has to be steeped in not only watching the matches, but also in listening to the crowd reaction they get. I recognized the fans concern for Fritz immediately, and eventually had to end their feud. Even though Fritz was an aging champion, I understood that Fritz was legendary in Texas, and I had to take care of his image. If I continued the Fritz and Brody feud, it would have taken Fritz's reputation as the dominant ass-kicker in Texas away much too soon.

The silver lining in that was that I also realized I had found Fritz's replacement. I never really looked at Kevin, David, or Kerry as Fritz's ultimate replacements – but after that particular series of matches I definitely started to look at Brody in that vein. Bruiser Brody was the one guy who could replace Fritz as the toughest guy Dallas wrestling fans ever saw in the ring, and once I realized that, I switched Brody to a babyface. Having Bruiser Brody on my crew was a blessing for me, because not only was he a tremendous talent, but we were really comfortable with each other. He was just one of those guys that I met and really clicked with, and in no time, Bruiser Brody became more than just a guy on my crew - he was my buddy.

When I first arrived as the booker for Dallas, Paul Boesch asked if I would book Gino Hernandez in the Dallas territory. I remembered Gino from when he was a kid. He would get out of school early on Fridays to come and work for Paul at his office in Houston. Then, he would go to the arena that night and throw things at me and The Spoiler during our matches. After the shows, he would try to sneak in the dressing room and catch The Spoiler without his mask on. That was Gino's big ambition in life as a kid, and I couldn't believe that he was now a wrestler. I told Paul that I would be happy to book Gino wherever I could, and Paul was very pleased to hear that, because Gino was like a son to him. And for the record - the rumor that Gino was Paul's illegitimate son is an out-and-out lie. Paul had ladies on the side - and I knew all of them - but Gino's mother wasn't one of them. Gino's real name was Charles Wolf, and his biological father was from Sheep's Head Bay, New York. Unfortunately, he deserted his family shortly after Gino was born, and Gino's mother re-married a wrestler by the name of Louis Hernandez. Gino took his new step-father's last name, but unfortunately, Louis was a heavy drinker and a pill popper, and was very cruel to Gino. Louis Hernandez worked out of the Houston booking office back when it was run by Morris Sigel, and Paul booked him on a tour of Japan. Louis died while on that tour, and in some way, Paul always felt responsible. After that, Paul became Gino's surrogate father, made sure Gino was well provided for, and gave him a life where he didn't have to worry about money.

When Gino arrived in Dallas to wrestle, I found him to be a handsome young guy, and was impressed by what a damn good worker he was for someone who had been wrestling for under a year. He truly was a natural. After booking Gino for a few weeks, I asked Paul if he would object to me putting Gino in my crew along with Tim Brooks, Mark Lewin, and The Spoiler. Paul was thrilled, but I didn't do that to appease Paul. I did it because Gino was really special, and I saw that he had a lot to offer. I truly wanted to take Gino under my wing and help him develop his talent and become a big star. Gino was electrifying in the ring. He could walk into a room and every guy wanted to kick his ass - and every girl wanted to love him. I actually had to assign Tim Brooks to be Gino's personal bodyguard, because Gino naturally had that kind



of heat wherever he went. Over the years, Gino would become like a son to me, and I loved him to death.

There was an old hardcore gym in downtown Dallas that Skandor Akbar's cousin owned, called Doug's Gym. It was a no amenities gym. For example, when Doug wanted to enlarge it, he simply knocked the wall down with a sledgehammer. That was the extent of renovating. Everyday, first thing in the morning, Mark Lewin and Bruiser Brody would go to Doug's. They would do their warm-ups, and then start their squatting. You would have thought the two of them were training for the Olympic squatting team the way they went at it. Then, after their work out, they would go for breakfast at a coffee shop across the street and sit in the same booth. They were perfect playmates. The only problem was, Bruiser was a babyface and Mark was a heel, and in 1977, kayfabe was next to holiness. Sure enough, Fritz called me in a rage one day, screaming, "What is this I hear about Bruiser Brody and Mark Lewin eating near the gym together? Fire them!"

"Who told you that? I don't believe it," I said - even though I had a hunch he was right. "Mark and Brody would never do something like that."

I then found Mark and Brody and told them, "Guys, stop going out to eat near the gym together!"

Brody and Mark understood where I was coming from, and assured me they would stop eating near the gym together. About a week later, Fritz called me in another rage - this time saying Brody and Mark were spotted eating breakfast in a restaurant across town! When I confronted Brody and Mark about that, they confirmed it, with Brody oh-so-cleverly pointing out, "Gary, we only promised you that we wouldn't eat together at the restaurant near the gym!"

Kayfabe is a funny thing. While the seriousness of it in the 70's cannot be overstated, sometimes certain guys would throw kayfabe away for a good buddy, so what Mark and Bruiser were doing was not exactly uncommon - no matter what any other old-school booker or promoter says these days. If a heel and a babyface liked each other and enjoyed hanging out together - regardless of what anyone in the office said, did, threatened, or tried - they would find each other. I knew those things were going on, but what was I supposed to do - spend all my free time trying to catch guys in the act, or fire them based on rumors? As far as I was concerned - heels and babyfaces could spend as much time with each other as they wanted - as long as they were careful about it and didn't cause me problems with Fritz, because there was no one stronger on kayfabe than Fritz Von Erich.

One time, Rocky Johnson, Tim Brooks, and I all drove to Houston to work a show. Now, Rocky was a babyface, so there I was - the booker of the territory - completely breaking kayfabe. Even though I shouldn't have been doing that, Tim and I really liked Rocky because he was a good guy, and we had a lot of fun with him. After the show, we were driving back to Dallas when we came upon a barbeque restaurant in Fairfield - just sixty miles from Dallas. We went in, sat down, and ate like pigs. When we were done, we jumped back in the car and must not have paid attention as to where we were going, because after awhile, we saw a sign that read "Houston: 26 Miles."

We were having such a good time together that we mistakenly drove back towards Houston rather than continuing on to Dallas! Rocky and Tim started panicking, asking, “What are we going to tell our wives? How can we explain that we got home at 8:00 a.m. when we should have been home by 3:00 a.m.?”

I said, “I don’t know about you two – but I’m going to tell my wife the truth. You can’t make stuff like this up!”

I spent a lot of time with Rocky Johnson, and his son, Dwayne, was always hanging around. My wife and I had always wanted a child of our own, but had a few miscarriages during our marriage. We had one in Australia, one in the Carolinas, and one in Atlanta. When we got to Dallas, our luck changed, and our first son Jason was born on September 23, 1977. He was born by cesarean, so I knew when he was going to come into the world. I was scheduled for a show in Houston that night, so I called Paul and told him that I wouldn’t be able to make it because my wife was having our first child by cesarean. Paul congratulated me, wished me well, and on Monday morning when I arrived at the office, Danny Plechas gave me two envelopes from Paul - one marked for me containing my \$500 payoff from the show I didn’t even make, and another with a \$500 savings bond for Jason.

Just after I got the booking job in Dallas, Don Owen, the promoter in Portland, contacted me and asked if he could send Moondog Mayne in. Even though it was well-known that Moondog had a serious alcohol problem, I said yes. When I told Fritz, he said that if he ever caught Moondog drinking, he would be fired on the spot. On the Moondog’s first night in, I saw him reach into his bag, take out a bottle of Wild Turkey, down a couple of slugs, and put the bottle back in his bag. I went right up to him and said, “Moondog, I know you have a problem, and I know you have to drink, but please leave the bottle in your car. Pour it in a Coke can or a Sprite can and drink it that way.”

He lit up like I was the first one to suggest something like that, and thanked me for the great idea. I was trying to be as understanding as possible, because I had great sympathy for Moondog, and understood that he had fallen under the spell of alcohol. So many people had sacrificed their careers and lost their jobs for their addictions, and I didn’t want that to happen to the Moondog in Dallas. I knew he shouldn’t be drinking – but at the same time I didn’t want him fired. Fritz would ask me every now and then, “Did you see Moondog pull the bottle out?”

Because of my suggestion to Moondog, I could honestly answer, “No, Fritz. I haven’t seen him pull the bottle out.”

Lo and behold, one day before going out to an interview, Moondog put his Coke can down in front of the monitor, and Fritz picked it up and took a big gulp. He immediately slammed it down and bellowed, “What is this?!?”

He then stormed over to me and barked, “You know why you haven’t seen him drinking out of his bottle? Because he’s been drinking out of this can! Get rid of him immediately.”

I went home and called Don Owen, who was Moondog's good friend - and sort of like his protector. I explained that Fritz wanted me to send the Moondog home, but I thought that if Don called Fritz something could be worked out. Don was a hell of a guy. He instantly called Fritz and smoothed things out, ensuring Moondog would be able to keep his job in Dallas. After that, I put JJ Dillon as the Moondog's manager, and started to position him as a challenger for Fritz's American Title. Since Moondog Mayne had an unusually large head, JJ would go out on interviews and claim his head was "too big for Fritz's claw." JJ would bring out a football, show how easy it was to apply the claw on that, and then he would bring out a basketball - saying it was just like the Moondog's head - and show how difficult it was to apply the claw on that. It was an exaggeration, of course, but it was a unique analogy to other sports. It worked out well, because when Fritz would try and get the claw on Moondog, it wouldn't work - and he would have to apply it on his stomach.

Things were going well with Moondog, and after his feud with Fritz died down, I booked him in a match against Jose Lothario in the Houston Coliseum, where the winner would face the NWA Champion the following week. I was managing Jose that night - with the gimmick being that I could take Jose to the World Title. It was set up that Moondog would win the match, and then Jose and I would get into a fight because he didn't win. Then, Gino would come down to save me and start a program against Jose. It was a little complicated, but nothing that we couldn't handle if everyone was at the top of their game. The finish was that Moondog would slam Jose, then go up to the top rope and dive off for the pin. However, on the way up to the top rope, Moondog drunkenly fell off backwards and knocked himself out. JJ had the damndest look on his face, and whispered, "Gary, what are we gonna do now?"

"Well it doesn't look like you're working with the champion next week!" I deadpanned.

I first met JJ in the Carolinas, and I liked having him in Dallas as another manager. I thought that was good for business, because why should I be the only manager? Having two managers in the territory gives the manager job credibility. If you really think about it - isn't it odd to have twenty wrestlers on a roster - but only a couple of them have a manager? I also saw JJ as the perfect foil for me to have heel vs. heel matches with. My way of thinking was: Why would I only want to fight good guys? If a heel was the American Champion, I would be foolish not to want Mark Lewin or The Spoiler to get a shot. At the time, I was managing Professor Tanaka, so I told JJ to show up on TV with Tanaka and start talking about how he just signed him. During JJ's interview, I came bursting out screaming, "What are you talking about, Dillon? He's with me!"

JJ whipped out a contract and gloated, "You must not have been very interested in him, because his contract ended and you didn't notice! So I took the liberty in signing him up!"

As he was waving the contract in my face, I was screaming, "Clerical error!"

At that moment, my war with JJ Dillon was off and running. Even though I still acted like a heel, the fans really wanted to see me defeat him, so they got behind me in our feud. I always felt that I could assume the role of a fan favorite if the villain I was working against was strong enough - and JJ more than fit the bill.

When David Von Erich was ready for his training, I told him to come to the Sportatorium so I could go through the same process with him that I did with Kevin. However, David insisted, "Uncle Gary, I'm ready to go. Kevin, Kerry, and I have been wrestling down by the pond, and I could have a match right now!"

Unbeknownst to me and Fritz, Kevin had secretly taught David and Kerry everything he had learned from me, Tony and Les. Sure enough, after some tryouts, I could see that David was indeed ready to start wrestling. At that point, I sent Kevin to Honolulu to wrestle for Lord Blears, because I really wanted to give David a fair opportunity and not debut under the shadow of his older brother. Kevin loved going to Honolulu, anyhow, so he was happy to do it. Kevin has a degree in marine biology, is really into diving, and would go down to central and South America every chance he got for diving expeditions.

Kerry didn't require extensive training, either, and was a natural in the ring from the word "go." Contrary to popular belief and published reports, I was not Kerry's first opponent. I wrestled all three of the boys many times over the course of their careers, but I wasn't that mechanical at that time of my life, so I didn't personally break Kerry in for his first match. Actually, ever since the crash I pretty much stopped taking bumps altogether. I apologize to those of you who wanted to see me get thrown all over the ring - but I just couldn't do it. Whenever I was hit, I would just hold the ropes and go down to one knee. Bruiser Brody used to joke that trying to bodyslam me was like trying to get a spider web off of his hand. However, just because I couldn't wrestle in the ring like I used to doesn't mean I couldn't defend myself when I had to.

One night, after a match in Houston, I was leaving the ring with Leroy Brown, who, incidentally, got his name from the great Jim Croce song, "Bad, Bad Leroy Brown." Anyway, as we were walking from the ring, I saw the biggest guy I had ever seen in my life. He was even bigger than Leroy. This guy was dressed in a nice shirt and khaki pants, and as we walked by him, he stepped aside for Leroy, but he quickly stepped in my way and picked me up in a bear hug with my arms pinned against my side. The cops thought it was part of the show, but he was really squeezing me hard - and it hurt. Since my hands were constricted, I bit his lip with everything I had. I was like a pit bull. I had his lip, didn't let go, and hung on with everything I had.

Hey, I might not have been a collegiate wrestler like Jack Brisco, but I could bite. All of a sudden, I felt him release my body, and he started whimpering like a dog that was hurt. When I stepped back, there was blood all over his shirt, and I noticed that he had pissed on himself. I had a free ride in Houston for a long time after that, and when people would see me coming, they would quickly step aside.

## Chapter 26: The National Wrestling Alliance

Right before I came to work for Fritz Von Erich, he was voted President of the NWA. Nobody really wanted that job, because it was like being President of what? The only responsibility that the President really had was to book the World Champion. I'm sure there were other little things he had to do, but it was really just a title. All I know is that since I was the booker for the office that was owned by the President - I had more work to do. In addition to my duties with the Dallas territory, I was the de facto booking agent for the NWA Heavyweight Champion. While talking to promoters like Don Owen in Portland, Mike Lebel in Los Angeles, Jimmy Crockett in Charlotte, and Bob Geigel in Kansas City was extra work, it enabled me to establish a good working rapport with the main power players of the NWA – so I really couldn't complain. And even though being the booking agent for the office of the President gave me a little more juice and stroke within the NWA - because everyone wanted favors - I never took advantage of that, and always tried to be as helpful to an office as I could be - whether it was the Carolinas or Tennessee. Since I was representing the President of the NWA, I didn't want anyone calling Fritz accusing me of playing games.

A lot of times promoters would call me when they had a week on the champion, saying that they couldn't use him for the whole week. The onus would then be on me to call around to the other offices and see if they could use the champion on those days, and then let Terry Funk - who had just won the NWA Title from Jack Brisco - know his dates had been switched. After awhile, I would just call Terry first - before I would call any other promoter. I was aware of the fact that he had a grueling schedule, and I wanted to give him the option of having those days off. I always tried to make sure the champion was as happy and as comfortable as he could be, whether he was in my area or if I was dealing him out to another territory. Of course, if word got out that the champion had a few days off, a promoter would invariably call me and ask for him. Most champions, if it was a good payday, would take the date. As time went by, though, Jim Barnett – the secretary of the NWA - took over the responsibility of booking the world champion.

Becoming a member of the NWA wasn't an easy thing. It was made up of guys like Jim Barnett, Frank Tunney, and Sam Muchnik – wrestling's old guard. Over the years, they let new guys in - like Fritz Von Erich, Dick the Bruiser, Roy Shire, and Eddie Graham - but it was only people that the old guard wanted in. The old guard allowed Eddie to take over Florida after Cowboy Luttrell became ill. They allowed Fritz to take over the Houston booking office after Morris Sigel died. If you were a wrestling promoter and the NWA was on your side – you were made in the shade. There were only two successful promoters at the time who weren't members of the NWA: Verne Gagne of the AWA, and Bill Watts of Mid-South Wrestling. Even Vince McMahon of the WWF was a member of the NWA, although he never had his ring announcer state that his matches were sanctioned by the NWA. He was a member and was on the board of directors, but he did not fly the NWA banner.

To be an official member of the NWA, you had to own a territory and a booking office – not just a town. For example - Jim Crockett owned a booking office and a promotion – so he was a full-fledged member. Paul Boesch ran Houston, but didn't own a booking office. He got his

talent from the Dallas booking office, so he was simply an associate of Fritz - and that's how Paul was looked at by the NWA: As an associate member. All that was required of him and other associate members was to use the champion and pay him thirteen percent of the house.

During my tenure as the Dallas booker, I went to seven National Wrestling Alliance annual conventions, which were held every July in Las Vegas. A representative from the NWA board would rent out a big conference room in a major hotel, and everything was set up first class. It was a big deal, because at the time, the NWA had fifteen booking offices and fifty associate promoters. All office personnel would be there, and the promoters would bring their wives and kids. The big name wrestlers would also show up, and they would bring their families, as well. When I would go as part of the office - everything was taken care of and the entire trip cost me nothing.

The NWA conventions were set up banquet style, and on the stage was a podium and a dais where the head honchos of the NWA sat. There would be scheduled meetings for three days - and lunch would be served every day. On the first day there was an open meeting where anyone in wrestling could come. Wrestlers, referees...if you were in the business - you were welcome. The wrestlers who showed up came on their own dime and really had things they wanted to discuss and present to the room. A lot of guys made their pitch for the world title. In a very respectful way, they would stand at the podium and say they would like to be considered for a run with the belt. Other wrestlers came looking to get booked in a new territory. They would explain that they were finishing up in a promotion, looking for something long term, and would be around all week if anyone was interested. Many guys pitched insurance and health policies, arguing that the NWA should come together and form some kind of health plan. Health insurance was always a topic that the wrestlers were big on. The discussion would always go the same route - with wrestlers being independent operators, how would the NWA collect the dues or payments? What if a wrestler went to a territory where the promoter didn't want to partake in the health plan?

Some wrestlers spoke on travel conditions, such as driving four-hundred miles to one town, then three-hundred miles in another direction, and then another two-hundred miles towards the town they were in originally. They were asking for us to consider logistics when booking events, and to keep in mind how many miles they had to travel. They didn't understand, though, that shows were booked based on building availability, and long road trips seemingly all over the map were sometimes unavoidable. It was good for guys to get up and give their grievances, though, and as important as the issues might have been and as passionate as the speakers were regarding them - I knew that a lot of the things they were asking for were never going to happen. And, as is the way with all open forums in any industry, some speakers were taken seriously, and some were looked at as guys we just have to sit and listen to before we can get on with why we're really there.

The second day was only for the bookers, promoters, and owners of booking offices. First, all the promoters would get up and talk about how their business was going. The promoters who had done really great business that year would talk about the crew of guys they had and expound on what helped bring them their success. Then, we would discuss important issues, like if we were happy with the champion, what we thought of the current talent situation, and who

was going to be the next big thing for the future of the NWA. Each promoter would discuss who they were developing in their area, and Fritz most certainly did mention his sons, and how they were World Champion material. And why shouldn't he have? A lot of talent trading went on at the conventions, as well. If there was someone that a promoter had on their roster that they had great hopes for someday, but felt they needed some more seasoning, they would ask other promoters to consider booking them and getting them smoothed out so when they came back they could be pushed.

We would also get into the guarantees. Some areas guaranteed \$25, and some guaranteed \$75. Every year, we tried to come up with a minimum guarantee across the board for all the Alliance promoters. For the more prominent promoters who paid \$75 like Fritz Von Erich and Jimmy Crockett - that was no problem. However, territories like Tennessee, Alabama, Kentucky, and Kansas City argued that if the guarantee went to \$75, they would essentially be tripling everybody's pay. That was an extremely important issue, and I was always a big pusher of the guarantee, because whenever I told one of my guys that Bob Geigel had a spot open, they would inevitably groan.

Promoters would also discuss which wrestlers were causing them trouble, and who they wanted blackballed. If a promoter had an axe to grind with a piece of talent and wanted them blackballed, they would present their case and implore the other promoters not to use them. There were many marginal guys who were blackballed over the years - and there were also attempts made at blackballing some of the more familiar names in the industry. There were rumblings on more than one occasion about Mark Lewin, Don Jardine, and Curtis Iaukea, because they were "too independent" and "free-willed," and needed "to be taken down a notch." In regards to Mark and Curtis, the promoters resented that they really made their living outside of America and weren't always willing to bow down and do what the NWA promoters wanted. There were quite a few promoters who took the blackballing discussion to shoot some arrows at Don Jardine, because he wasn't above attacking a promoter if he wasn't pleased with a payoff. Whenever I heard their names brought up in those discussions, I let them know it, and would warn them that they're getting too much heat.

Ivan Koloff, Ernie Ladd, and Rip Hawk's names were also seriously debated, because they had joined up with Eddie Einhorn's non-NWA affiliated promotion, the IWA. The Einhorn situation just underscores what an awesome power the NWA was. When Eddie Einhorn started promoting shows in towns against NWA promoters, the NWA immediately banded together and sent in every top name star of every territory - plus the World Champion - to outdraw him and beat him off. That was part and parcel of being a member in good standing of the NWA. If you were having problems with outside promoters - such as Einhorn - you would have the full weight of the Alliance behind you, and every top name would come and help you run him out of town -gratis. When wrestlers were sent to a town to load up an NWA card against a competing promoter, they were paid by the office that sent them - and not by the promoter they were sent in to help.

Therefore, promoters paid to be a part of the NWA not just to use the NWA champion, but for protection against people trying to hurt their business. It was like the mob. The NWA was a strong, powerful organization - and if you were a part of it - you had great power. NWA

promoters could do great harm to people, or they could do great good to people - it just depended on who was pulling the trigger at that particular time. One time, Eddie Graham called me up because someone was trying to promote against him, and he asked if the Dallas office could help in any way. I was part of the National Wrestling Alliance, and I would do anything I could to help out an NWA promoter, so Bruiser Brody and I flew to Orlando and I managed Brody that night. I did things like that on more than one occasion.

The final day of the convention was a closed meeting for the owners of the booking offices. I couldn't go into those, and God knows what they discussed when it was just the big-wigs in there.

All of the meetings were held during the day so that we could all go out, eat dinner, gamble, see shows, and have a good time during the evening. Las Vegas was where the Von Erich boys and I could actually hang out together in public, and that was good for us, because I could spend quality time with Kevin, David, and Kerry, and even if somebody saw us - what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas!

Whenever I returned from the conventions, wrestlers would be paranoid, asking, "Who were they knocking? Did they say anything about me?"

Aside from warning my close friends that they were in danger of getting blackballed, I always played dumb whenever a wrestler asked me what was discussed. I never saw an advantage to inflame hatred towards the NWA or other promoters, or create paranoia among the talent. I felt it was a privilege not only to be a part of that organization, but also to be a part of the second day meeting - and I had an obligation to keep what I heard and what I saw private. It was an honor that I attained the position of booker, and I treated it with respect.

Every year there would be a new NWA address book printed up and handed out at the convention. It would list every booker, promoter, and office person - as well as their contact information - in the world, even if they weren't affiliated with the NWA. For example, for Vince McMahon's territory - the WWF - it would have Vince McMahon's office number and home number, Gorilla Monsoon's office number and home number, and Arnold Skaaland's office number and home number. On the Florida page, the book would list Eddie Graham, Duke Keomuka, Hiro Matsuda, Jack Brisco, and Buddy Colt's office numbers and home numbers. It had the AWA, Steve Rickard in New Zealand, Larry O'Day in Australia, Giant Baba in All Japan, and Antonio Inoki in New Japan. Anyone that was involved in an official position in wrestling was in that book. This book was like the Holy Grail, and it was stressed that there was to be no knowledge outside the office that a book like this even existed.

I must confess that I told Don, Mark, and Brody about the book, though. Don and Mark couldn't have cared less, but for some reason, Brody was fascinated with it. One year when I came back from the convention, I had a different color book - because every year they changed colors - and Bruiser asked if he could have my old book. I told him that there was no way I could do that, because if word got out I gave him my old National Wrestling Alliance handbook, I could get in a heap of trouble. Brody, as creative as ever, quickly offered, "What if I tear the cover off of it and ink out any reference to the NWA?"



I had to laugh, and said, “Swear to me that if you’re ever caught with this book that you didn’t get it from me.”

Of course, he promised up and down that he would never say where he got it from. Brody had integrity and character, and I knew he would never give me up for handing him that book, so I tore off the cover and gave it to him. A short time later, I started getting calls from promoters and bookers wondering if I had a guy working for me by the name of Bruiser Brody. When I told them I did, they would ask what he was like. I was always honest, and told them that he drew me nothing but money. I must have received half a dozen calls about him, so the next time I saw him, I said, “Hey, Bruise, I had a lot of people calling about you.”

His eyes lit up and he exclaimed, “It worked!”

It turned out that he called a bunch of people in the book and told them that he was interested in taking dates in their territory as long as they cleared it through me. That’s how Bruiser got started getting booked all over creation. He started going to Japan in 1979 – where he became a huge sensation - but he also wrestled regularly in New Zealand, Australia, Puerto Rico, and all these random towns in the United States. And it all happened because of the book that I gave him. Before I knew it, in addition to booking Dallas, I was also taking care of Bruiser Brody’s deals in other territories. Brody would tell other promoters to clear all his bookings with me first, so I could make sure that he was only taking dates where he was able to make good money. Plus, if a promoter ever wanted him for a show that he didn’t want, he played the good cop and I was the bad cop, saying that “I couldn’t spare him that night.” Sometimes, Brody would double book himself - accepting two shows on the same date. At that point he would call me begging, “Gary, you have to get me out of this one.”

I would have to call the promoter and tell them “I messed up.” Meanwhile, I wasn’t even involved in the booking in the first place!

Once word got out that I was “responsible” for Bruiser Brody, promoters would call me with any problems they had with him. For example, Brody was rather disheveled in his day-to-day appearance, never wearing anything other than sweatpants and a T-shirt. He didn’t have a whole lot of style, to say the least. When he first started going to St. Louis in 1978, Sam Muchnick called me up in a fit, screaming, “Bruiser Brody cannot come up here like that! I have a dress code policy, and he has to wear a coat and nice slacks while wrestling for me!”

I had a talk with Bruiser Brody about it, and after I explained to him Sam’s requirement for his wrestlers, Bruiser decided that the best way around that was not to dress as Sam wanted, but moreover, to crawl in through the basement window of the Kiel Auditorium. That way – Sam couldn’t see Bruiser in his sweats! That was typical of Brody, though. He did what he wanted – and he did it on his terms. There was no such thing as compromise. I actually had promoters call me, incensed over something he had done – or wouldn’t do - imploring me not to use him in Dallas anymore! On the flip side, so many more promoters called me up gushing that Bruiser Brody was “the greatest thing” I ever sent them.

It never bothered me that I was regularly booking him outside of Dallas, because I truly didn't want him in Dallas and Fort Worth every week. If the fans saw him week in and week out, it would have taken away his edge - and he would be considered local and ordinary. For me to be able to send him out for a week or ten days was a God-send, and I would always take advantage of it. Plus, he liked doing it. However, once it got to the point where he was taking bookings all over creation, I had to tell him, "Bruiser, you need to take some time off and relax."

He just looked at me and said, "Gary, there's a lot of promoters out there who want to pay me \$300, and I want to get as much money as I can."

It was more than just making a quick buck for him, though, because he worked for some of the worst payoff guys in wrestling, such as Bob Geigel. Brody did what he did because he was a smart guy and an innovator. He was building up an international base with Japan, Australia, and the Caribbean - as well as a national base within the NWA and AWA - with a keen eye on becoming a dominant player in the business. He also took advantage of his time on St. Louis TV, because he knew that "Wrestling From The Chase" was the Holy Grail for wrestling fans in the mid west. Bruiser Brody understood early on that if he built a good base with that show - which had been on since I was a child - then people would see him on the same level as Lou Thesz, Dick the Bruiser, Dory Funk, Jr., and Jack Brisco. That kind of know-how had a lot to do with his education and background in journalism. He understood the who, what, why, when, where, and how. Bruiser Brody was very analytical, and knew who he was, understood the tools that he had, and used them better than most.

# Chapter 27: Southwest Championship Wrestling

Joe Blanchard got his greatest fame and success from being a TV announcer for Jim Barnett's promotion in Indianapolis. Fritz Von Erich wrestled for that promotion, and when he went to Texas to start his own promotion in Dallas, he brought Joe Blanchard with him to be his announcer. Then, when Fritz overtook the Houston office in 1967, Fritz told Fred Brown and Dorothy Livingood – the promoters in San Antonio - that if they didn't sell Joe Blanchard a part of their business, they shouldn't bother calling him looking for talent. Fritz literally used the power of his newly acquired booking office to secure Joe a career in promoting.

There are a lot of promoters who aren't good promoters. However, most promoters who make their living at it are competent - but Joe Blanchard wasn't competent at anything other than being a TV announcer for Jim Barnett. Instead of focusing on his towns, Joe Blanchard preferred sitting around, drinking beers, telling old war stories, talking about his great days in football, and calling his buddy Gene Kiniski.

My biggest problem with Joe stemmed from the lackadaisical way he promoted his towns, and how that directly affected the wrestlers from the Dallas booking office. Instead of working hard and hustling to ensure his crew was always making money - and trying to come up with clever ways to grow his business - he was very complacent. Every six weeks, Joe would bring guys like Roddy Piper, Chavo Guerrero, Black Gordman, and Gran Goliath in from Mike Lebelle's promotion in Los Angeles, and get big houses in San Antonio, Corpus Christi, and Harlingen. Only on those nights would his shows make money, and for the other five weeks his shows made nothing. That's what Joe wanted to do, and that's how he ran his business. That style was good enough for Fritz, because he knew that every six weeks, he would get twenty-five percent of \$30,000 from those big three shows - and that's a lot of money.

I want to make this clear upfront: The fact that Joe Blanchard would get \$30,000 every six weeks was not a reflection of his promoting skills. It was simply because Mike Lebelle's promotion aired on the Spanish International Network in Texas, and eighty percent of San Antonio – even to this day – speaks Spanish. Yes, Joe was the promoter in south west Texas, but the goose that laid his golden egg was the talent from Mike Lebelle's TV show – and that's the only reason Joe made any money.

My main concern was the wrestlers from the Dallas booking office, and since Joe was an associate of that office, I had to send my wrestlers to him on a weekly basis to work his shows. That meant that once a week my crew would drive 290 miles from Dallas to San Antonio where they would work two shows and make \$35. Then, they would drive 140 miles to Corpus Christi where they would make another \$35. After that, they would drive another 200 miles to Harlingen where they would make \$35, and then they would have to drive 630 miles back to Dallas. That's 1,260 miles in a car - with the gas, three hotel rooms, and food all paid out of the wrestler's own pockets – to work four shows and make \$105. That's what I had to send my wrestlers to on a

weekly basis. That upset me a great deal, because there were times where I would send my crew to wrestle for Joe Blanchard – and they would lose money!

I didn't own a town or a booking office. All I had was my reputation as a booker who could make guys money and help them develop their gimmick, and I took that very seriously. Wrestlers had to know that if Gary Hart was booking them, they would be taken care of. How could I possibly be taking care of them if I was sending them to work for a promoter who didn't pay them what they deserved? I took the way Joe promoted south west Texas personal, because I was responsible for my crew doing well, and I wasn't living up to my promise when I sent them to work for him. I knew that without my crew's support, I was nothing, and Joe put me in an awful position. And even though the wrestlers told me they understood – it always bothered me. To top it off, every six weeks, I would have to fight for my guys to get positions on the big shows he promoted, because Joe would have been content just bringing in the crew from Los Angeles, and paying them all the big money. Joe had no concern or respect for talent and their financial considerations. He looked at wrestlers like cattle, and viewed himself as a lofty promoter. In reality, Joe was lazy and had no desire to even try to get bigger houses, and just rested on his laurels that every six weeks he would make good money off of Mike Lebelle's guys.

Joe wasn't what I would call a dynamic television producer, either, but it's not as if anyone saw his show, because it was truly unwatchable. When Joe would make his TV shows, he would record it live with two audio tracks: One with a Spanish speaking announcer, and the other with an English speaking announcer. That's a great idea – but unfortunately, the announcers would sit right next to each other at ringside and record their commentary at the same time! Therefore, if anyone tuned in to see Joe's show, they would hear someone speaking another language in the background and get terribly distracted. Plus, if an English speaking wrestler was giving an interview for the Spanish speaking audience, the Spanish announcer would have to stand there and interpret everything he said – dragging down the whole rhythm of the show. It was simply not a good show, and that's why no one watched it.

In addition to the way he abused and took advantage of my talent, he flat-out refused to give the Von Erich's an opportunity to get over in San Antonio – both on his TV and on his cards. I used his son Tully in both Dallas and Fort Worth, and did not beat him or mistreat him in any way. Some bookers would have made Tully pay the price for how his father mistreated the office - but I was a professional.

Even though Tim Brooks was one of my closest and dearest friends, he was anything but a stooge. He never repeated idle gossip he might have heard in the dressing room, but he would tell me certain things if he was concerned it would affect my business - and he did it in a very professional manner. Therefore, in any of Joe Blanchard's towns Tim served as my eyes and ears. Tim called me from San Antonio one Wednesday night saying, "You're not going to believe what happened. Joe Blanchard allowed Jose Lothario to take the mask off of El Halcon."

He was right. I didn't believe it. El Halcon drew big money all throughout the Dallas territory, and I couldn't fathom why any promoter would ruin a great gimmick like that. I thought Tim was ribbing me, but he assured me that it really did happen, because Jose talked Joe

into thinking El Halcon would get over more without the mask. Now, anyone who knows anything about masked wrestlers from Mexico knows that their mask is the most important thing. I knew that what Jose was telling Joe was bunk, and the reason he did it was because he didn't want the competition, considering himself to be the biggest Mexican star in Texas.

For that dirty little deed, I went to San Antonio the following week and made it a point to let Joe know that I was running the Dallas office, he was promoting San Antonio, and if he allowed Jose to do anything like that again, I would make sure that he got nothing but underneath talent and jabronis. It might have been his town, but it was my talent. That was also the second time I had to suspend Jose from Dallas and Fort Worth, because I wasn't going to let him mess my guys up. Since the news about El Halcon losing his mask wouldn't travel outside of San Antonio, I kept the mask on him in Dallas, Houston, and Fort Worth, and continued doing good business with him. Losing the mask did end up hurting him in San Antonio and Corpus Christi, though - no doubt to Jose's delight.

Joe Blanchard did a lot of questionable things, though. One night, I got a call from Joe, screaming at me that Bull Curry had been slapped around by Bruiser Brody during a match. I said, "Joe, when you first told me you were going to match them up I thought you were kidding. I warned you that if you put a 65 year old man with Bruiser Brody, that Brody will hurt him."

He was in no mood to hear an "I told you so," and barked, "Well you control the talent, and you always like to remind me that you're the boss, so you better take care of your talent or I won't use Bruiser Brody anymore!"

"I do take care of my talent and I tried to take care of you by warning you not to book Brody with Bull Curry," I told him. "Now, if you don't want to use Bruiser Brody anymore, that's fine with me. I can get him booked in Florida, Kansas City, and Puerto Rico any day of the week - so I don't really care what you think."

Now, this has nothing to do with Bull Curry as a person. I liked Bull, respected him, and worked with him a lot. However, I realized at that time that Bull was way past anything other than being a special referee, and should not have been put in the ring with a 320-pound raging Wildman. I had warned Joe of that when he originally pitched me the idea of the match, but he's such a headstrong jerk that he paid no mind to my input.

That Friday, I arrived at the Houston office to line out that night's show with Paul Boesch, and saw that he had Bruiser Brody booked against Bull Curry.

Here we go again.

Paul told me in no uncertain terms that what happened in San Antonio cannot happen that night in Houston, because "Bull Curry is a friend of the Houston office," and if Brody didn't do what Paul wanted, Brody wouldn't work in Houston again. I calmly said, "Paul, I told Joe Blanchard not to book that match, and when you and I talked about this some time back, I told you not to book it, either. I told you that Bruiser Brody would not sell for or protect Bull Curry's persona, because he's a little old man, and Bruiser Brody has to take care of Bruiser Brody."

I also reminded Paul that for every one promoter who doesn't want Brody, there are ten that do. Paul was clearly ready for that line, because he looked at me and smirked, "Yeah, but it would be pretty tough on you if you never worked Houston again."

"Don't ever presume that I work for you," I told him. "You have no authority over me. I am the booker for the Dallas booking office, and I run the company. If I don't come to your town, none of my talent will, either."

Paul just sat back in his chair, and was highly insulted. I was probably a little aggressive, but he was actually blaming me for something I told him not to do! I took some time to cool off, then returned to Paul's office and tried to be diplomatic, saying, "I'll talk with Brody, but if he doesn't want to do it, you'll have to find somebody else to work with Bull Curry tonight."

Now, if I had booked those cards, I would have put Bull with Tim Brooks, because I know Tim would have taken care of him, and made him look like the "Wild" Bull Curry of old. Bruiser Brody couldn't, wouldn't, and shouldn't do that. Paul and Joe couldn't get that through their heads, though, because they were in yesterday-land, and hung up on who drew them money in days-gone-by. I never cared about who drew me money yesterday, because I was looking for the guy who was going to draw me money tomorrow. That was my mindset. Anyways, I went to Bruiser and asked him to take it easy on Bull Curry, and he flat out refused. He told me that Curry had sucker punched him in San Antonio, so he had to slap him around a little bit - but believe me when I tell you, he wasn't proud of that. I understood pride and principle, but I asked Brody to do a special favor for me that evening. He agreed, kept his word, and the match was horrible. It went two minutes, but at least he didn't hurt Bull, and just got himself disqualified.

Shortly thereafter, I started hearing some things that led me to believe that Joe Blanchard was planning on breaking away to form his own booking office. My first inkling came when Tim Brooks told me that he had gone out drinking with Johnny Boyd, and Johnny said that he couldn't wait until "Joe kicked Fritz out of Texas."

I went to Fritz with this news, warning him of my suspicions, saying, "Joe is going to screw you over. Mark my words: He's going to make a move on you."

Fritz didn't believe it. He liked Joe and trusted him, and it actually made him crazy that I would even suggest that Joe would turn on him. He just wouldn't accept the fact that his friend could do such a thing, and Fritz and I had some of our greatest arguments over Joe Blanchard, to the point where he would yell, "I don't want to talk about this anymore!"

Then it happened.

In 1978, Joe Blanchard broke away from the Dallas booking office and opened his own promotion: Southwest Championship Wrestling. As soon as the announcement was made, I called a meeting with the Dallas talent and announced, "We're losing the San Antonio market. I understand that some of you live in San Antonio, so if any of you want to work for Joe full-time, you're free to go, and if you eventually decide to come back here - you'll still have your job. All

I ask is that you conduct yourselves as professionals. Remember - we're all friends here. This is a battle between the promoters, and we're caught up in the middle. Let's get through this as easily as we can."

I played it off as just a "business decision" on Joe's part, but deep down I was very angry and wanted to choke him. At the same time, because of how angry he always made me, the day he broke away from the Dallas office was the happiest day of my life.

As far as Southwest Championship Wrestling ever being a threat, or feeling like Joe could overtake the Dallas booking office - there was no doubt in my mind that he couldn't do it. I had the Von Erich boys, Bruiser Brody, and the NWA World Champion. Who did he have? His talent pool was beyond weak, so we looked at his "promotion" as a non-existing entity. Besides, it's not as if he had a money making territory. San Antonio was always considered the weak sister, and the big three were always Dallas, Fort Worth, and Houston. He was nothing.

Once Joe left our booking office, he began saying that AWA Champion Nick Bockwinkel was the "true" World Champion. Once he started doing that, he was looked at by the NWA as an outlaw promoter. However, he was not seen as ambitious - like Eddie Einhorn was - so he was pretty much ignored. In the very beginning, we thought he might make a move into Dallas or Fort Worth, because there were plenty of TV stations he could have gotten on and plenty of buildings to run in, but after a few weeks, we realized he would be content to just sit in the valley and do his typical business. Therefore, we didn't go to war with him. We knew we would eventually - but we wanted to bide our time and wait until we got TV in his area. As strong as KTVT was, it didn't go into San Antonio. We wanted to wait until we got a TV and a promoter in his territory before we made our move.

Even though losing San Antonio was a blessing for me, it was a very bad time for Fritz, because he felt that Joe really blindsided him. Joe Blanchard was totally ungrateful for all the good things that Fritz had done for him over the years, and if it wasn't for Fritz, Joe would never even have been a promoter. What Joe did to Fritz is tantamount to me sticking a knife in Don Jardine's back or screwing over Mark Lewin on a business deal. Friends just don't do things like that to one another. What Joe did really bothered Fritz, and they never got back together or rekindled their friendship after that. Verne Gagne, a couple of times, tried to make peace between them, and I know that Bob Geigel did, as well, but Fritz would forever feel totally and absolutely betrayed.

## Chapter 28: Building the Von Erich's

Building the Von Erich boys while Fritz was still the #1 babyface in Dallas wasn't easy. People in the office would constantly suggest angles in which the heels would beat up the Von Erich boys so that Fritz could run out and save them, and I would look at them like they were crazy and reply, "No, let's beat up Fritz and let his kids come and save him! What good will it do us to beat up 20 year old kids who are the future of our promotion?"

Eventually, I built the territory to where Fritz could slip out of the picture a little bit and business wouldn't suffer. Plus, with Fritz not on TV every week – I could really focus on his boys and develop their careers. When I suggested to Fritz that he might want to consider easing into semi-retirement, he asked me, "Can you live without me in the ring?"

Talk about a loaded question. Thank God I was quick on my feet, and replied, "No, but I'll have to try."

Fritz was actually very content to stay on the sidelines, because it was getting tough for him to make it through his matches. Not only were his knees completely shot, but he was a heavy smoker, and after a few minutes in the ring, he was done. Aside from that, though, Fritz was old and rich. Why should he bother getting in the ring night after night? He also wasn't one of those guys that had to constantly be the center of attention, stay on top, and be the big shot. That wasn't Fritz. He knew who he was, was overly confident of it, and didn't need the cheers of the fans every night to keep him happy. Plus, he truly didn't want to prevent his children from getting the spot that he had for so many years.

Fritz wasn't your typical wrestling promoter, either, and wasn't all-consuming by wrestling. He had other businesses ventures and a life outside of wrestling, and never got involved in the day to day operation of his wrestling business. Owning the Dallas booking office was such a good cash flow for him that he used it to develop a real estate business, and when he wasn't working on that, he simply took care of his ranch, his cattle, and his kids. He was never overly involved in what I was doing. He would come into the office on Mondays, and we would talk about the direction and the talent. On Tuesdays, he would stop in to approve the payoffs, and then I wouldn't see him for the rest of the week. I would talk to him maybe three times a week on the phone - not about what we were doing in the ring, but more about business dealing with promoters in our area. Fritz was a very smart businessman, and I learned more from him than anyone else on those matters.

Because I consistently drew him money, I had Fritz's total confidence when it came to running his wrestling business, and he never looked over my shoulder and micro-managed me. I love when guys of my generation talk about how they "did business with Fritz" and throw his name around - because he did not have a rapport with the wrestling talent, and did not do business with wrestlers. He left the talent relations to his booker. Fritz was not the kind of boss who would go over the head of his booker. He just would not do that. If a guy ever tried go over my head and deal with Fritz, he would tell them to speak to me. Yes, perhaps his promoter buddies Gene Kiniski or Verne Gagne would call him up and ask if their sons – Kelly and Greg -



could get booked in Dallas. Even then, he would have them call me so that I could give them a starting date. Believe me – Fritz was not hands on. He hired me to run his business, expected me to run it, and didn't want me calling him at home asking him what I should or shouldn't do. He would have suggestions and criticisms sometimes, but he never interfered creatively, or questioned who I brought in or let go. For that, I respect him. Occasionally, he would be miffed if I went too far on the TV's, and would have to remind me, "The TV's belong to me. I'm only loaning them to you, so don't lose them!"

Fritz and I had our problems, though, and it would be a lie to say we didn't. That's what made our interviews and angles so good over the years - because there was a legitimate degree of hostility and animosity between us. Some of the things I couldn't say in polite company or in an office meeting I would say on television. Take, for example, when I would refer to him as "horse face." That was known as ribbing on the square.

Once Fritz graciously stepped aside, I could focus on building his boys up - and make sure they wouldn't forever be in their fathers' gigantic shadow. Because Kevin, David, and Kerry were Fritz's sons, they suffered from the same anger and resentment that other sons of promoters like Greg Gagne and Mike Graham suffered from. Big names like Dick Murdoch didn't want to come to Dallas and do business with the Von Erich boys, because he knew he would eventually have to put Fritz's kids over. Dick wasn't alone in that regard, though. One night, Karl Von Krupp objected to putting Kevin over, though, and made a snide remark about having to "put over the promoter's son." Kevin made no apologies for who his father was, but was also man enough to challenge Karl right then and there, offering to step out in the parking lot with Karl to see who would win in a "real" fight.

Of course, Karl quieted right up.

The Von Erich boys had such natural raw talent in the ring that accusations of nepotism just couldn't stick on them the way it did on other sons of promoters. Sure, having Fritz as a father was a good way to open the door, but there have been a lot of wrestlers kids who couldn't accomplish half what those boys did once they got inside. I don't care who your daddy is – that won't make people buy a ticket to see you if they don't like you. The Von Erich boys did great business in Dallas because of their talent. If it was merely because their father owned the promotion – then why didn't Mike Graham do great business in Florida, and why didn't Greg Gagne do great business in the AWA?

With that in mind, let me make something perfectly clear: Fritz Von Erich was not the one who was mad crazy to keep his boys in the #1 position in Dallas. That was me - because they drew money. A lot of the criticism that Fritz has received over the way people perceived he pushed his boys was, in actuality, due to the way I personally booked them. A lot of what I did with the Von Erich boys I learned from watching Dory Funk, Sr. do with his sons - because I was there when they were breaking in. I learned from Dory, Sr., that if you've got something, and you want to make something out of it - you have to get behind it one-hundred percent. Because of that, I treated the Von Erich's as my boys, my future, and what I was building my territory on. And there was no doubt in my mind that all three Von Erich boys would be World Champions - just like the Funks.

Even though this chapter is all about how I systematically built the Von Erich boys into superstars, I don't want to make it seem like Dallas was all about the Von Erich's. Even though they were a large part of it, Bruiser Brody was an important part of my crew, as well, and always ensured a sellout. Bruiser Brody was a tremendous alternative to the Von Erich's, and helped give Dallas wrestling two different looks: The high flying young Von Erich's, and the big, rugged, butt-kicking babyface named Brody. The Dallas territory wasn't one dimensional like a lot of people say it was, and even though a lot of people look at Dallas strictly as a Von Erich territory, I know it was much more than that. Calling Dallas "Von Erich country" is insulting to Dallas mainstays like Bruiser Brody, The Spoiler, Mark Lewin, and Tim Brooks.

Not only that, but people seem to neglect the fact that I brought in a lot of different wrestlers into the Dallas territory during my run as booker. Verne Gagne sent me an Iranian wrestler named Khosrow Vaziri so I could help develop his style. Verne told him to listen to whatever I told him and not to listen to anyone else, so Khosrow thought I was the Holy Grail and called me "Coach Gary." Of course, years later, he became a WWF Champion under his moniker, The Iron Sheik. Then, Don Owen sent me a young wrestler named "Superfly" Jimmy Snuka. He must have heard some wild stories about me from the other guys, because when he arrived in Dallas, he gave me a knife with the word "Superfly" written on it, which I kept for years. Of course, out of respect to Jimmy, I never cut anybody with it! Jimmy and I had a very good relationship, and I was so happy for him when he became a sensation in the WWF.

I also hired a young wrestler named Jim Minton, who had just finished a successful run in the WWWF, where, along with Killer Kowalski, he held the Tag Team Title as The Executioners. Prior to his career in wrestling, Jim had served time in the air force, working as a prison guard in military jails, and he used to talk to me about that quite a bit. He became a very close and dear friend to Bruiser Brody, and they even lived together in Brody's house. It was really funny, because the only things in that house were two mattresses and a cooler, with Brody sleeping on one mattress and Jim sleeping on the other. It was when he came to work for me in Dallas that the gimmick that made him famous was born, because as soon as he arrived in Dallas we started calling him "Big" John Studd - and the rest is history.

I also brought in established names like Ernie Ladd and former WWWF Champion Stan Stasiak. Lord Alfred Hayes was on my roster for quite a while, as well. He was a great heel, because during his matches, whenever his opponent would start to make his comeback, Al would slide to the floor and do his "walk" - never letting the babyface get any heat. Paul Boesch used to go crazy over his antics! Lord Al Hayes was really something, and truly was a "Lord." One little known fact is that I started Jim Duggan in the business. He was a football player at Southern Methodist University, and I actually broke him in and booked him on my undercards. I even gave him his first pair of tights - two pair of long purple tights and trunks that I no longer wore - before sending him to find fame working for Bill Watts.

Brian Blair was a young kid who, at the time, was married to Leroy McGuirk's daughter. He was also a friend of the Von Erich's, so I brought him into Dallas as a babyface. I also hired Barry Orton, the brother of my good friend Bob Orton. He was sort of small, but was a good middle of the card guy. Another guy I brought in was "Luscious" Johnny Valiant. This was after

his ultra-successful run in New York as part of the Valiant brothers, but he never really got over in Dallas because he worked too loose. Not just anyone could get over in Dallas, because you had to go out and beat the holy hell out of your opponent. That's why guys like Johnny Valentine, Wahoo McDaniel, Bruiser Brody, The Spoiler, and The Missouri Mauler got so over in Dallas. The only loose worker who ever drew big money in Dallas was Mark Lewin – but he was so good that no one could tell he was loose.

While in Australia, I learned a great deal from Jim Barnett about the importance of ethnic wrestlers – such as Mario Milano and Spiros Arion – that the fans could connect with. I also watched Vince McMahon and how he booked guys like Bruno Sammartino, Pedro Morales, and Antonino Rocca in New York. So given the fact that I was in Dallas, running a territory two-hundred miles from Mexico, I used Al Madril on top for a long time. He was a great alternative to Jose Lothario – because Al was wonderful, and would do anything to help get a guy over.

Facts are facts, though, and no matter how many great wrestlers I brought into Dallas, whenever the Von Erich boys were booked – business went up. Kevin, in particular, became so popular that it was because of his success we were able to get out of the North Side Coliseum - which held 2,500 people - and go into the much bigger Will Rogers Coliseum, which held 9,000 people. He was packing buildings every time he worked, and got over through his charisma and high-flying ways. After one of the first big houses I had with Kevin, I got the pay sheet and saw that Kevin only got \$250. I went to Fritz's office and complained, "That's not right. The kid drew the house. He should get more money."

Fritz wouldn't budge, though, and that happened on multiple occasions. Everyone thought that the kids were making big, top money - three times what the other guys were paid - but they weren't. Many times, they got paid less than their opponent. I know because I made the payoffs. I would send my suggestions upstairs, Fritz would check them over and make any changes he wanted, and there was never one time where if I wanted to give the boys a little more money that he went along with it. Plus, when the boys would go to Japan – they would get \$2,500. Fritz would let them keep \$1,500, but took \$1,000 for a booking fee. Now I'm not saying the boys were poor, because they all bought their own houses by themselves, but Fritz did not lavish them with great wealth.

He set it up so that no matter how big the boys would become in the wrestling industry – they would always need to look to him for their livelihood. Fritz wanted to control the purse strings of his boy's finances so that he could better control them. He wanted to ensure that they would always be dependent on him financially, and he never wanted to lose that control - even when they were grown and out of the house. Every parent has certain ways they control their children. Some do it with guilt trips, others do it by stirring jealousy among their children, and some do it financially. If you think about it - how do you really and truly control someone? Financially. It's no big thing for a wealthy and powerful man to tell his children if they don't do what he says he would cut them off. We've all heard of scenarios like that – so it's really not that uncommon. And I'm not sharing this insight with you just to spread some gossip – I'm doing it to give you an idea as to why the Von Erich boys became so rebellious later in life.

Getting back to the success of the boys, David was on a different level than Kevin. He wasn't a high flyer, but he was phenomenal in his in-ring work, and went out there and had a great match every night, much like Dory Funk, Jr. I knew David was really over the night I held something I called "The People's Choice Match." I sent five guys out to the ring in Fort Worth and had the ring announcer, Boyd Pierce, ask the audience who they wanted to see wrestle NWA Champion Harley Race. As Boyd would put his hand over each guy, by the pop of the crowd, we could determine who the crowd wanted. When Boyd put his hand over David's head, the people went crazy.

Harley Race liked working with David so much that he took him to St. Louis so they could wrestle at the Chase Hotel. Harley had David slap the claw on him on St. Louis TV, and he bled like a pig! That one angle really got David over and made him a major drawing card in St. Louis, and I, in turn, took that tape and put it on Dallas TV, and David's career was off and running.

Kerry was a combination of Kevin and David. Although he could do a lot in the ring mechanically, he didn't have to. Since he had so much charisma, I honed his matches to where he only had to do a few things - and that was enough. Kerry was the one that Fritz really wanted me to focus on for the future of the company, and, on more than one occasion, made it very clear that his favorite son was Kerry. I don't think what I'm saying is any great shock, though, because even Kevin and David knew that Kerry was their father's favorite, and "the golden boy."

The importance of Mark Lewin, Don Jardine, and Tim Brooks in the development of the Von Erich boys' careers cannot be overstated. I was so fortunate to have them on my crew because I could trust them to do the right thing, and The Von Erich boys were so fortunate to have learned the art of wrestling from great talent like them. Mark, Don, and Tim literally helped turn the boys into the stars they became. They taught the Von Erich boys how to become main event wrestlers by wrestling them night after night - because redundancy is the best teacher in wrestling. Mark, Don, and Tim also really taught them how to have a match: A beginning, a middle, and an end. They also taught them how to change pace. Mark, Don, and Tim understood that their job was to get the Von Erich boys ready to draw money like their father had done for so many years, and were as helpful as they could be. Kevin, David, and Kerry Von Erich were so fortunate to be around superb in-ring performers like Mark, Don, and Tim, and they knew it and appreciated it. Not only did the boys share the ring with these three legends, but they also shared a dressing room with them - and since they had drawn money all over the world, the boys regularly went to them for guidance and advice. Being around true legends like Mark Lewin, Don Jardine, and Tim Brooks also helped the boys in not having the typical "superstar attitude." They understood that there was a lot more that went into getting them over than just the name Von Erich - and they knew who the guys were who got behind them and made it happen.

I was also savvy enough to utilize Bill Apter and his wrestling magazines to my advantage. Bill was always kind to most wrestlers that he had a personal relationship with, and even though he did very few stories on me, he and I had become quite friendly over the years. I gave him total access to the Dallas territory, and in return, he gave the Von Erich boys an unbelievable amount of press in his so-called "Apter mags." My goal there was to make the Von Erich boys nationally known, because his magazines had a lot of distribution in the east. They

really weren't available west of the Mississippi, and it was close to impossible to find a wrestling magazine in Dallas – so his exposure really helped out on the east coast. I don't know how many times he put them on his cover and how many articles he wrote about them – but he helped them big time. It's funny, but with all of those "interviews" his magazines featured, Bill never even talked to the guys before he made up their quotes. I don't know of any wrestler that ever sat down and talked with Bill about a story before he wrote it. The feeling was - any publicity was good publicity.

It was clear to me that Kevin, David, and Kerry were a credit to professional wrestling, and could really open up peoples eyes as to what younger guys can bring to a territory. As I explained earlier in the book, if a wrestler was not in his mid-30's or 40's, he wouldn't even be considered as anything more than a mid-card wrestler. After the way Billy Goetz booked me in Chicago, I knew firsthand the benefit of having young talent high on the card. So not only did the success of Kevin, David, and Kerry change the fans mindset, but it also helped promoters understand that youth adds excitement to a promotion - and helps make a big difference at the gate. The Von Erich boys were revolutionary in wrestling in that aspect.

One of my responsibilities was to get the Von Erich boys as many outdates as possible. I had three of them, and I got them exposure in Japan, Hawaii, Kansas City, St. Louis, Georgia, New York, Charlotte, Oklahoma, Puerto Rico, Amarillo, and Florida. Once they got there, it was up to each office to take care of them and feature them as they saw fit. If the boys were ever unhappy with the way they were being treated by another booker, they would call me, but my advice was always the same: "Do whatever they ask while you're there – and remember - you don't have to go back."

They were great kids, though, and rarely, if ever, complained. And by all accounts, the Von Erich boys always conducted themselves as businessmen while visiting other territories, and weren't spoiled brats at all. They definitely never took advantage of who their father was. I never saw them do it or heard of them doing it one time. I've seen other wrestler's kids be extremely difficult - but that just never happened with the Von Erich boys. They listened to everything I told them, never questioned me, and trusted me completely.

JJ Dillon had been in Dallas with me, but he left to Amarillo. I saw him up there during one of my visits and asked him to come back to Dallas. JJ is intelligent, well spoken, and has a very good interview style, so I put him at ringside to do some heel commentary. He was someone that I trusted and felt confident in to get important programs across, so I would send him out, and even though he was a heel, I told him to be subtly pro Von Erich, and compare the Von Erich boys to the Funk boys. He would go out there and muse, "It would really be historical to have five World Champions from Texas."

JJ did it so well, and by him saying it was a possibility that the Von Erich boys could follow in the Funk brothers footsteps - and doing it in such a businesslike manner - people really got behind the idea that these were future champions. JJ was a very important part of the Von Erich's success, and if I hadn't had Bronko with me, I would have asked him to be my assistant, because he's honest and forthright, very diplomatic, a hard worker, and an all-around great guy.

In 1979, my wife and I had our second son, Chad, on August 17. Ironically, Chad was born on a Friday – just like Jason - and I thought Paul would start to think I was using my son's births as excuses just to get out of flying into Houston! Instead, Paul showed how gracious he could be, and sent me another \$500 savings bond – this time for Chad. It was a hectic time at home, though, and JJ Dillon's wife would come by and pick up Jason so my wife wouldn't have to chase an eighteen-month old around the house. JJ's wife was a wonderful, sweet lady, and she would take Jason to the park and keep him for six hours. What a relief that was for my wife.

Having two children grounded me in ways that nothing had ever grounded me before. I used to do anything I wanted because I was Gary Hart. Once the boys came along I was still Gary Hart, but more importantly, I was responsible for them. You see - I never had a dad. He ran away before I was born. There are certain things that happen in your life that have profound affects on you, and that had a profound affect on me. I always knew that if I was fortunate enough to have children they would be my number one priority – and they were.

Children are the most wonderful gifts that God gives us on earth. If you're lucky enough to have children - there's nothing grander. When I see people mistreat their children, it disgusts me, because the most precious thing in my life are my two boys. Being a father gave me a different outlook on so many things. For example, if I had a wrestler on my crew who had children in school, I couldn't bring myself to fire him. I knew a lot of bookers didn't care about that, but I was different. Plus, when negotiating with wrestlers before they came in, I would ask them if they had any children. If they did, I would be upfront with them, telling them that since I would only use them for six months, they shouldn't bring the family. Or, I would offer to bring them in at the beginning of the summer and keep them until the midterm of school. I started thinking about those kinds of things, especially after my sons were born, and I became very father-conscious.

I also became more community-conscious, and found myself booking a lot of fundraising spot shows. High schools and middle schools would call the office asking us to help them raise money so they could buy new band uniforms or weights for their gym, and women's shelters and food drives would call looking for unique fund raising activities. How could I say no? Aside from wanting to be a good humanitarian, Fritz agreed with me that doing fundraisers would be great public relations for the company, because we weren't just taking - we were giving something back to the community, as well. I'm proud to say that over the years, the Dallas booking office raised thousands of dollars for schools, charitable organizations, and YMCA's throughout the state of Texas. Joe Blanchard didn't do that, the Funks never did that, and Bill Watts, Jimmy Crockett, and Jim Barnett didn't do that, either.

Sometime in 1979, Les Thornton called me and told me that he really wanted to be the Junior Heavyweight Champion of the World, and said that if I could help him in any way secure the belt, he would really appreciate it. I really wanted to repay him for all the good he had done in training Kevin Von Erich, but at the same time, he deserved the belt. He was from England and was a real wrestler - a hooker, shooter and a magnificent all-around performer. Les had a great career, but he wanted to be in the history books as a World Champion, and I wanted to help him. I contacted Jimmy Crockett in the Carolinas, Mike Lebelle in Los Angeles, Don Owen in

Portland, and, of course, Fritz Von Erich, and made the case for Les. My campaigning worked, and Les got the belt in March of 1980.

In the late 70's, there was a strong rumor going around that Harley Race was going to drop the NWA Title to Ric Flair, but instead, he dropped it to Dusty Rhodes on August 21, 1979. When he took the title, Fritz instructed me not to announce that Dusty had won the belt on our show, and told me not to book him in our territory. When I asked why, Fritz explained that Dusty was only holding the belt for a short time, and he didn't want to introduce a short term champion in Dallas and "confuse the fans." I asked Fritz if I could at least bring Dusty to Houston, but Fritz shook his head and asserted, "No. We're not taking any dates for the champion. Call Dusty and tell him we're not interested. Give our dates to Jim Barnett."

My personal feeling is that Fritz thought it wouldn't be a good idea to bring in another Texan who beat Harley Race, because in his mind it made his kids look "weak," because they had all wrestled Harley and never won. If that was the case - and I suspect it was - I understand that, but I didn't understand why Dusty couldn't have come to Houston or Austin. I couldn't bring myself to call Dusty and tell him that I wasn't going to use him in his home state, so I just called Jim Barnett. That phone call to Jim was the hardest call I ever had to make, because Dusty was a dear friend of mine, and I truly felt awful. After all Dusty and I had been through together, here I was - the booker of the Dallas booking office - and I had to deny him an opportunity to defend the World Title in his home state. Dusty understood - I hope. He never held it against me, I'll say that.

Bruiser Brody was going in and out of Kansas City, and after one of his trips, he came back to Dallas and told me he saw my old friend Pak Song, and mentioned that he wasn't being used right. I immediately called Bob Geigel and asked if I could score Pak from him, and a deal was worked out. When I picked Pak up from the airport - I was shocked. Pak was emaciated. His face was drawn and gaunt, and when he put his wrestling tights on, I could literally count the ribs on his body. He was so horrific looking it was scary. It was obvious that Pak couldn't work in the ring, so I told him that I wanted him to serve as my bodyguard, and that way I could get him as much money as I could.

Pak was extremely ill, and it turned out that he had diabetes, and he also had tumors in his sinus passages. My father-in-law was a doctor at All Saints Hospital, and I tried taking Pak there to get some X-rays and see if something could be done, but he flatly refused, because his religion didn't believe in medicine and going to doctors. I did everything in my power to get him to go to a doctor, and once that failed, I did everything I could to make his stay in Dallas as comfortable as possible. And when his visa expired and he had to go back to Korea, I drove him to the airport knowing that he didn't have much time left in this world. He gave me a hug - which was really unusual for him - and said, "Thank you for everything."

After that, I never saw him again. Pak went home and died.

I booked a match between Gino Hernandez and Kevin Von Erich, with the stipulation being that if Gino beat Kevin we would shave Kevin's head, and if Kevin beat Gino he would

shave Gino's head. During an interview, I spoke up and declared, "I'm so convinced that Gino will win, that if Kevin beats him he can shave my head, instead!"

Of course, Gino lost the match and my head was shaved. I didn't mind losing my hair, because I was going bald, and it got to the point where I was spending too much time on my interviews looking in the monitor to see if people could see my bald spot. I realized that had to stop, and that I had to do something about my hair - or lack thereof - so I took advantage of my "genetic disposition," and used it to enhance a program. Besides, as far as I was concerned, it was all about the Von Erich boys, Bruiser Brody, and Gino Hernandez, and I would have done anything to help those guys get over.

Around this time, an awful tragedy befell the Von Erich family. David and his wife, Candy, had a child named Natosha Zoeanna that died within three weeks of birth from SIDS. The baby was found sleeping face down in the crib. That caused his divorce immediately after, and it broke his heart. It was just a horrible time. David's wife was drop dead gorgeous, and she really loved him, but Fritz and Doris never thought anyone was good enough for their sons, and always thought girls wanted their sons for their money. David took some time off for a little bit, but was never quite the same after that.

This was actually the second tragedy for the Von Erich's, because Fritz and Doris' first son, Jack, Jr., died an accidental death in 1959. I've heard all sorts of fantastical stories about his death – such as how Fritz forced Jack, Jr. to go out and pick up his bicycle and he got electrocuted – but here's the true story, from Fritz's mouth to my ears:

Fritz and Doris were living in a trailer in Niagara Falls, New York – which is where Kerry was born, by the way – and Fritz was working in Buffalo for promoter Pedro Martinez. One day, Fritz went to do a match in Cleveland, Ohio, and when he arrived home, he saw Gene Kiniski standing outside his trailer. When he pulled up, Gene got in his car and told him that he had some horrible news. Apparently, Jack, Jr. had been outside playing when he touched an electrical socket going into a trailer. He was electrocuted and collapsed into a puddle of water that formed from melting snow. Between the electric shock and landing face first into a puddle - Jack, Jr. died immediately. Fritz was so distraught upon hearing the news that he punched out the drivers' side window on his station wagon with his bare hand.

Jack, Jr. was just six years old when he died.



## Chapter 29: Death of the Amarillo Booking Office

In 1978, Dory, Jr. and Terry Funk sold the Amarillo booking office to Dick Murdoch and Blackjack Mulligan. I wasn't too surprised when they sold, because they had tried to sell it to me when I got my big settlement from the plane crash.

After the crash in 1975, Eddie Graham got Bobby Shane, Dennis McCord, and I a very good litigation attorney. Since Buddy's plane was insured, we sued the insurance company, and in the summer of 1977, I walked away with \$100,000 from the civil trial. Then we went for a federal case. The judge said there was a preponderance of evidence on our side against McNeal Air Force Base for when their air traffic controller assured us we could have made it, so the federal government offered to settle by paying us \$10,000 each. I wanted to take it, but Dennis didn't. He thought we could get more, so we declined their offer, and six months later we got letters from the court saying they had found on the part of the Air Force Base. We should have taken the \$10,000 settlement and walked.

I truly shouldn't complain, though. The real settlement was that I came out alive. Anyways, I guess word got out that I had just come into some money, because shortly after, I got a call from Stanley Blackburn. He was a really great friend of the Funk family, and a true friend of wrestling in general. Stanley was well connected, super wealthy, and a great guy. He started fishing around with me, asking if I would be interested in buying the Amarillo booking office from the Funks. I explained that my wife and I just had a new baby, we just bought a new townhouse, that Dallas was where I wanted to be, and politely said "No."

A little later, Dory and Terry called me. They offered to sell me their booking office for \$50,000 - which would have been a hell of a deal. However, as we spoke, it was clear that if I bought it, they couldn't guarantee that they would wrestle for me on a regular basis. So basically, I was offered to buy Amarillo without the Funks. If the Funks had told me that they would give me eight days a month of bookings, then that would have been fine. Unfortunately, they couldn't guarantee that. They explained that they were wrestling and booking for All Japan, and couldn't commit to what I needed in order to make the deal work. I knew it would be impossible to draw in Amarillo without them - and would be like trying to draw in Dallas without a Von Erich - so I gracefully declined.

Dory and Terry continued to run Amarillo, but were so consumed with booking and working for All Japan that they neglected their own business and it fell on hard times. I helped them by sending them talent as often as I could - such as the Von Erich boys. The reason I sent the Dallas talent up to Amarillo was not only out of respect for the Funks, but also because I really loved their dad. He was so good to me - even though he gave me a silly name when I worked for him. From the day I met them until today, I've loved the entire Funk family to death. The boys loved working in Amarillo - especially David, because he liked to work heel there. Although I thought it was great experience for him, Fritz didn't, so he had to cut it out. Eventually, Fritz and I sent David to Florida to learn how to work heel - because that wasn't as close to Dallas!

Eventually, the Funk boys sold the Amarillo booking office to Dick Murdoch and Blackjack Mulligan. Unfortunately, they were just not prepared for a venture of that magnitude. I'm not saying that Murdoch and Mulligan weren't capable of the job, but their minds were elsewhere and they just weren't properly financed. Just like the Funks, Murdoch and Mulligan had commitments in other territories, so they weren't in Amarillo on a regular basis, and it wasn't their main priority. However, once it got to the point that they were going to other territories simply to keep feeding money into the Amarillo booking office and they had to bring Mario Savoldi in to run things day-to-day, they realized they were just spinning their wheels, and that financially they couldn't handle it.

To give you an idea of what it would cost to effectively run a booking office in those days, let me outline the cost for just the talent alone: You would need at least twelve wrestlers and two referees to run a proper show - so that's \$75 a head guaranteed. Maybe the referees get \$50 and some of the wrestlers get \$100 - but it averages out to \$75 a head. So to run a show, it would cost \$900 per night just for the talent. If you run every night, it would be \$6,300 per week. In three months that comes out to \$75,600. Again, that's just the cost of the talent. And keep in mind - I'm going minimum, not top shelf. Even more sobering is the fact that those costs don't include the ring truck, the ring, renting an office, telephone bills, television costs, or anything like that. Take the television costs as another for-instance: You would spend \$500 a week for the facility that you taped your show in, and then you would have to bicycle that show to your towns. If you had nine towns - you would need nine tapes. The tapes used back then cost \$500 each, and it used to cost \$20 to send a tape from town to town on a weekly basis. You would have to mail that tape 52 times a year, to nine towns a week. And what do you do if that tape gets lost? Needless to say, running a wrestling promotion in the 70's was not cheap.

It didn't take too long before Murdoch and Mulligan had to get out from the mounting bills, so they literally just walked away from the booking office. Any one of the Amarillo promoters like Nick Roberts in Lubbock, Don Slatton in Abilene, Mike London in Albuquerque, or Gory Guerrero in El Paso could have assumed responsibility for the booking office, but they would have had to front the deal and assume all losses, and none of them wanted to do that. At that point, Dick and Blackjack encouraged Fritz to go in there, because the promoters and local wrestlers were their friends, and they didn't want them to lose their jobs.

In 1980, Fritz made a deal with the Amarillo promoters in which the Dallas booking office would assume the booking responsibilities for west Texas and provide the talent in exchange for the promoters paying Fritz sixty percent off the top of their gates. That might seem like a lot, but nobody complained, and we were treated like the white knights riding to rescue. That's the way that the Amarillo booking office went out of business, and how the Dallas booking office took over. Of course, at that point, we were no longer the Dallas booking office. Since we were the only NWA sanctioned booking office in Texas, we officially became the Texas booking office.

We really had to start from scratch in west Texas, because once Mario Savoldi realized that Dick Murdoch and Blackjack Mulligan were bailing on the territory, he literally took the

rings and drove off. On top of that, we had to figure out what to air in west Texas in place of the old Amarillo show. Even though we already had a weekly ninety-minute show on KTVT, we couldn't use that footage, because it belonged to KTVT. So each Amarillo promoter put up \$100 a week so we could produce a show that was unique for the Amarillo market. Steve Harms was the sports commentator on NBC-5 in Fort Worth and was a friend of Fritz's. When he first came into the office, I thought he was going to do an expose on pro wrestling, but I soon learned that Fritz wanted him to handle the commentary for the west Texas shows. I was leery about using him, because anytime I had ever been around TV people, they always seemed to look down at wrestling and act like what we were doing was beneath them. However, Steve was different, and showed me that people in the media can actually respect and care about wrestling, and he quickly became a good friend of mine. Plus, with his television background, he did a great job on the microphone.

Interestingly, it took a while for our talent to get over with the Amarillo fans, because even though we had the Von Erich's, Bruiser Brody, The Spoiler, Mark Lewin, Tim Brooks, and Gino Hernandez, the people there wouldn't accept anyone other than the Funks, and really resented another Texas wrestling family coming into "Funk territory," because in their eyes, the Funks were the premier wrestling family of Texas. Even though Amarillo had been completely "Funkized," as time went by, Amarillo fans - especially the young ones - fell in love with the Von Erich boys and took them into their hearts. It was a long, hard struggle, though, and I spent a lot of time in west Texas trying to ensure Amarillo would be a profitable venture for Fritz. We actually took a big loss in the beginning, but the promoters were extremely cooperative, and everyone's hard work eventually paid off.

The significance of this period cannot be overstated, because this was literally the demise of one of the major booking offices in America. Dory Funk, Sr. took a desert and made it a paradise for many years for a lot of guys. Since the 1930's, every major star in wrestling went through Amarillo, and the only thing that kept it strong was the genius of Dory Funk, Sr. The death of the Amarillo booking office was truly a big deal - and quite historical.

After having my two boys, I felt it was time to reinvent my character. I was in my late 30's, a daddy, and was no longer comfortable portraying a gangster styled "Playboy" like I had been doing for over fifteen years. In order to give myself a new gimmick, I came up with an idea where I would have my own promotion within Texas - a show inside the show. My stable of wrestlers became their own separate group, and I was no longer billed as "Playboy" Gary Hart. Instead, I was announced as "Gary Hart presents..."

To ensure this gimmick got over, I contacted my old friend Armand Hussein, who was a black wrestler I knew from my days in Michigan. He was a devout Muslim - even to the point of wearing the dress of the Afrikaans. I was always into subtleties, and I knew that with me standing next to a black man who wore African garb and ran his mouth while I endorsed everything he said, every redneck in Texas would want to pay good money to see my guys get their butts kicked. So in the storyline, Armand came into Texas and invested in my stable of wrestlers. Our organization was then renamed H&H, Ltd. - Hussein and Hart, Limited. Co-managing with Armand was extremely helpful to me, because with the addition of the west

Texas territory, I was booking two spot shows a night. Now, I could send Armand to one show while I went to the other.

One day, Tom Renesto, Jr. stopped by my office. I had known him since he was a kid, because I worked with his father in Georgia four years earlier. He told me he had recently moved to Texas, had been wrestling for a few years, and was looking for work, so I hired him as a mid-carder. I also hired his brother Tim, who wrestled as an Indian named Speedy Tall Tree, and their half-brother John as a referee. I always considered their father a good friend of mine, so I was glad to help his boys out.

Lou Thesz had been so wonderful to me and Don Jardine, as I relayed earlier in the book, and I had so much respect for him, that anytime I could throw money his way and bring him into Texas - I would. And every time I did it, I was so happy I had the opportunity to do it. Anytime I would bring Lou in as a guest, a wrestler, or a referee, it was a boost to business and always added class to the show. I brought him in to do some announcing for Thanksgiving week, and that was when he coined the phrase, "The Von Erich dynasty."

He was doing some announcing for our KTVT television show, and he mentioned that although Fritz was never the NWA World Heavyweight Champion, he had been the AWA Champion. We always made a point of emphasizing that Fritz was never a "World Champion," but that he merely held the AWA Title. That was our not-so-subtle way of saying that nobody else's belt meant anything, because in our eyes, the AWA belt was looked at as less than a TV Title! Then, Lou Thesz said, completely off the cuff, "I think Fritz started a Von Erich dynasty here, and I think there's a good possibility that at least two - if not all three boys - will be World Champions."

While Lou was in Texas for the week, I booked him for a Thursday night show at the Amarillo Fairgrounds. The main event was Kerry Von Erich vs. The Spoiler - with Lou Thesz as the guest referee. It was snowing in Amarillo that night, and Kevin and David - who had wrestled as a tag team earlier that night - thought it would be fun to throw snowballs at Kerry during his match. Unfortunately, one hit The Spoiler in the head, and the other hit Lou right in the back. When Lou got hit, Nick and Jerry Kozak - the promoters of the show - went crazy, threatening to call "Jack."

I always chuckled when people called Fritz Von Erich "Jack" to make it seem as if they were really tight with him. I knew the man and worked for him for well over ten years at that point, and I never heard anyone call him "Jack." He was always referred to as Fritz.

When Lou came back to the dressing room, I started to apologize, but he brushed it off and told me he thought it was funny. Later that night, as we were leaving, Lou was hiding behind the back of the Fairgrounds, and as Kevin and David made their way to their car - Lou nailed them with snowballs, and it was great to see him join in the fun. For some reason, though, the Kozak's considered what Kevin and David did completely and utterly reprehensible. I told them that I talked to Lou, and that he said everything was fine, but they couldn't have cared less, and insisted on calling "Jack."

When I arrived in Houston for the Friday night show, I learned that the Kozak's had called Paul Boesch, as well, to tattletale on the boys for the "snowball incident." Then, I actually had to sit there and listen to Paul indignantly lecture me about it!

"How dare they throw snowballs at the ring," he fumed. "Was Gino involved?"

"No, Paul. Gino was not involved."

This was beyond ridiculous and completely blown out of proportion, so when I got to Dallas on Monday, I walked right into Fritz's office and explained the whole story, and how Lou thought it was funny and even got revenge on Kevin and David.

Fritz and I just shared a big laugh over it.

## Chapter 30: Houston, We Have A Problem

There's a great song by Stealers Wheel that perfectly describes the situation I was in when it came to Houston: "Clowns to the left of me, jokers to the right - here I am stuck in the middle with you."

That was me: Stuck in the middle between Fritz Von Erich and Paul Boesch.

As the booker of Texas, I had to deal with Paul Boesch on a weekly basis, and it was never an easy process. Paul had tremendous animosity towards Fritz over when he stole the booking office from him in 1967, and he resented having to deal with anyone who represented him. Because of that, Paul - from day one - rebelled against whoever was in the booking chair, and it was no easier for Danny Plechas, Bronko Lubitch, or Red Bastien before me.

Of course, there was an underlying hostility Paul had that was unique to my situation: The kid that dared to slap him in 1967 ended up as the booker of Texas. That aside, I'm quite sure that if Paul didn't harbor bad feelings towards Fritz, then he and I would have had a very pleasant relationship, because I never personally had a problem with him, and he was always very gracious towards me - but business-wise, Paul caused me a lot of problems. Problems that I shouldn't had to have dealt with, because I had enough responsibility in taking care of my talent and ensuring they were all making a good living.

This is a tough chapter for me to write because I don't want Paul to come off as a horrible, awful guy - but I can't tell the story of my time in Texas unless I tell the whole sordid story. I couldn't care less how Joe Blanchard comes off in this book - because he deserves it. He wasn't a good promoter and had no quality as a human being. Paul Boesch did. Paul was a great promoter and a great person, and I would really hate for him to come off looking like a jerk. So before I launch into all my problems with Paul, I would like to make one thing perfectly clear: Paul Boesch was something really special in wrestling. Even though I had legitimate issues with his payoffs earlier in my career - he definitely earned his reputation as one of the best payoff guys in the country. I was in bathtub matches, eat-a-can-of-dogfood matches, and tuxedo matches with him - and he made me look ridiculous on all those occasions - but he also made me a lot of money.

Paul also did a lot of great things for the city of Houston. He was the kind of guy who would get behind civic causes he believed in and really spend time on them. For instance, he would speak in front of rotary clubs in order to raise money for women's shelters. Paul helped a lot of people in a lot of ways. He was a gracious, wonderful guy who did a tremendous amount of good for many people. And as for the accusations that he would skim money off the top of his gates, you have to realize that Paul wasn't the only promoter who did that. All of the old line promoters used to do that, because they had to do that during the good times in order to survive the bad. It was common practice - and a necessary one if a promoter wanted to survive. Jim Barnett skimmed, Jim Crockett skimmed, and Eddie Graham skimmed more than anyone. Therefore, any promoter who accuses Paul Boesch of skimming off the top has a lot of balls - because the same thing could be accused of him.

Again, I want to stress that it's not that Paul and I personally disliked each other - and it should be noted that we had more good times than bad – but when times were bad they were really bad. I've had many years to reflect and think back, and I now realize that everything Paul did wasn't a blow against me. It was a blow against what I represented: Fritz Von Erich and the Texas booking office.

Throughout my entire tenure in Texas, I never saw Fritz and Paul engaged in pleasant conversation. Fritz would go to Houston once a month for the shows, but he would never drop by Paul's office. He never dealt with Paul in the arena, either, and instead hung out in the dressing room and acted like one of the boys. In all my years, I only know of Paul and Fritz sitting down together twice – and I was involved in both meetings. The first sit-down they had was called by Fritz, and it was over Paul's use of the World Champions. Paul loved the World Title more than he loved life itself. He brought in NWA, AWA, and WWF champions, and would actually question who the “real” World Champion was during his broadcasts. While doing the announcing, he would wonder out loud, “Wouldn't it be great to have a match where we find out who the real World's Champion is?”

That was the kiss of death in the eyes of the NWA members, because they didn't recognize the WWF or AWA belts as World Titles - but as regional championships. AWA and WWF champions were the champion of half a dozen towns, but our champion defended the title all over the world! When Paul Boesch put those two belts in the same category as the NWA Title - all hell broke loose. At that point, Fritz and I flew to Houston to have a sit-down with Paul, and Fritz made it abundantly clear that Paul's questioning who the “real” champion was would have to stop. That was the first time I ever saw them deal with each other.

The second – and last - meeting I ever saw them have together was called by Paul. The purpose of that sit-down was because Paul no longer wanted to pay twenty-five percent of his gross profits to Fritz. Instead, he wanted to pay fifteen percent. Fritz said “absolutely not,” and that “a deal's a deal.” Even though Paul constantly moaned about that, twenty-five percent was a fair deal. The wrestlers got thirty-two percent and the booking office got twenty-five percent of the box office - which left Paul with forty-three percent. That came out to around \$13,000 every week for Paul – which was pretty good.

Other than those two instances, I dealt with Paul one-on-one, and a big problem I had with him stemmed from how he would bring in wrestlers from outside Texas to wrestle in Houston - and cause my talent to lose money. When I signed talent to wrestle in Texas, they knew they were getting the opportunity to get booked in Dallas, Fort Worth, and Houston on a regular basis. Paul Boesch was known for being a great payoff man, and my crew loved it when I booked them on his shows. However, Paul would bring in outsiders from other territories and promote them in the main event – thereby cutting my main event guy's payoffs in half. Rather than getting \$800, they would get \$400, because they were working on the undercard rather than the main event. Worse yet – some of my boys would lose a whole spot on the Houston show - because there were only so many spots on the card. It was my responsibility to ensure the Texas talent would always be taken care of, so that was always very stressful for me. My crew was the

most important thing to me, and I did everything I could to protect them and their livelihood - but Paul obviously didn't have that same mentality.

Now, I didn't mind that he brought outsiders into Houston. I myself brought in Abdullah the Butcher, The Sheik, Harley Race, and Pat O'Connor into Dallas and Fort Worth – but I never brought them in and gave them my guys' spots. As much as I enjoyed bringing those guys in –I couldn't enjoy it if it came at the expense of one of my regular guys losing a payday. Therefore, I would either mingle them in with my talent, or I would make them a special attraction. I did that because I had to show my crew that I was a standup guy and that I was looking out for them. I know I've said it before – but it can't be taken too lightly: A booker is nothing without a good crew, so I always stood very hard for my crew.

I resigned myself to the fact that Paul would bring in outsiders, but my philosophy was that if he was going to do it, he would have to deal with them on his own, because I had my hands full with my crew from Texas. One night, Paul brought in “Superstar” Billy Graham and Ivan Putski from the WWWF, and put them in a match in the Summit - which had cameramen and big projection screens above the ring so the audience could see close ups of the action. However, when Billy and Ivan went out to the ring for their match, they got so excited to see themselves on the big screen that they started having a pose down and neglected to have their match! Paul was going nuts, demanding that I run down to the ring and tell them to start their match. I just looked at him and shrugged my shoulders, saying, “What can I do?? You brought them in! They don't work for me!”

There was one night, however, where I decided to take advantage of working with talent from other territories, and went into a little business for myself. Paul brought in Bruno Sammartino to work against Professor Tanaka, whom I was managing at the time. We worked a finish where I would run in the ring to save Tanaka, and Bruno would put me in his patented bearhug. As soon as he started squeezing me, the place went crazy, so I whispered in his ear, “I could do this for you in Madison Square Garden.”

Still not over what he had erroneously heard about me a decade earlier, he coolly replied, “That won't be necessary.”

The Sheik had fallen on hard times, and his business in Detroit was really bad. Even though The Sheik never made me any money when I worked for him, I felt bad for him and wanted to help him out, so Mark Lewin and I started flying to Detroit once a week to do some shots for him. He would pay our plane trip, but we never got paid for our matches - we did it gratis. Everybody would ask us why we would do such a thing without getting compensated, but Mark and I didn't care about money. We just wanted to help “The Zib.” That's what Mark and I called The Sheik – as did most of the guys who knew him well. In order to help him out, I also got The Sheik booked in Houston. When Paul told me he wanted to put him in a cage match against Abdullah the Butcher, I pointed out that neither The Sheik nor Abdullah were big fans of losing, and with cage matches - there has to be a winner. Paul just looked at me and said, “You're the booker - you figure out the finish. I'm promoting it.”

As he walked away, I hollered, “Don't do it, Paul. This will backfire!”



The night of the match, Paul came up to me and asked what the finish was. I told him that I was able to get The Sheik to put Abby over, and Paul was delighted. Paul then walked right up to The Sheik and blurted, “So Abdullah’s beating you tonight, huh?”

The Sheik went off, screaming, “Who do you think you’re talking to? Some jabroni?”

Paul instantly went on the offensive and snarled, “Well I hear that you’re in need of money and that your territory is dying.”

At that moment, The Sheik snatched Paul by his lapels, and looked like he was going to kill him. I ever so gently put my hand on the back of The Sheik’s shoulder and quietly repeated, “Zib, please take your hands off of him.”

He finally let go of Paul and announced, “I’m not doing the job under any circumstances.”

Paul instantly shot back, “Then I’m not paying your transportation and you won’t get anything for the day.”

The Sheik got right in Paul’s face and said, “I don’t need your money. You only have one town. I have fifty.”

He then turned and left the building, and we had to scramble and find a suitable replacement for The Sheik. Paul decided on Jose Lothario and - just to be difficult - declared that he wanted Abby to put Jose over clean in the middle of the ring. I tried explaining Abdullah’s “no-job” rule, and that what he wanted was next to impossible, but Paul demanded that Jose go over. So in order to appease Paul, Abdullah, Jose, and the fans - I served as the sacrificial lamb for the evening, went in the cage with Abby, and had Jose cover me for the win.

Paul loved Jose Lothario, but as I have discussed earlier, Jose was a real troublemaker. Since Jose wasn’t a part of my crew, he would sit in the Houston dressing room and tell my talent that if they didn’t like the way I was using them, that they should give Joe Blanchard a call. He was literally trying to swipe my crew! Luckily, I hired great, loyal guys - and they stuck with me - but Paul knew that Jose was stirring the pot in his dressing room, and he allowed it.

Booking cards with Paul could be an interesting experience. Paul, Bronko, and I were coming up with the finishes for a Friday night card, and things were going fine until we got to the main event: NWA Champion Harley Race against Andre the Giant. As Bronko and I were discussing different ways Harley could keep the belt without Andre having to do the job, Paul was holding a pencil, rolling it around his fingers, and making it obvious to Bronko and I that this pencil was of special interest to him. Out of nowhere, he marveled, “I have the greatest idea in the world! During Andre and Harley’s match, they can come out on the floor. Then, I’ll drop a pencil off my announcer’s desk, and Andre will slip on it, fall down, and not be able to get up. At that point, Harley will slide back in the ring and beat the count. After the referee raises Harley’s hand, I’ll reach over, pick up the pencil, and muse, ‘How can such a small thing befall a giant?’”

Bronko and I just looked at each other in disbelief. How do you respond to something like that? After a long, awkward silence, I said, "I don't know about that one, Paul..."

I was trying to be nice, but c'mon – the idea was ridiculous! Paul was convinced this was his best idea yet, so we called Harley and Andre in to get their opinion on it. I ran the finish by them, and made it clear that it came from the creative mind of Paul Boesch. When I was done, Harley gave me this incredulous look like it was really my idea, but I was just pawning it off on Paul. Then, Andre scoffed, "Hey boss, I cannot fall down for a pencil."

Paul was highly offended that they didn't flip over his finish, and just sat there and sulked. I then suggested a scenario in which Andre would beat Harley by disqualification, which everyone agreed on.

Another issue I had with Paul was that he never liked using the Von Erich boys, and did everything he could to prevent them from becoming marquee names in Houston. The Von Erich boys drew money everywhere they went, but Paul refused to give them an opportunity to do so in his town. In his eyes, there was a glass ceiling, and the Von Erich boys weren't going to break through. My feeling was, if you were an associate of the Texas booking office, you should have no problem featuring talent who were doing sellout business – and help them get to the level they deserve. The Texas office had three good looking kids who were drawing big money and were setting dollar records and attendance records throughout Dallas and Fort Worth, yet Paul would rather leave them off his cards and bring in outsiders like Nick Bockwinkel and Bruno Sammartino. Why? Out of arrogance, jealousy, vindictiveness, and anger.

Paul took his frustrations with Fritz out on Kevin, David, and Kerry, and I had no tolerance for that kind of behavior. There were many promoters and wrestlers that I did not see eye-to-eye with and had problems with, but it never impacted the way I treated their children. Don't get me wrong - I used Gino Hernandez because he was terrific and he deserved it - but I would have hoped that Paul would realize that I was using Gino regularly in Dallas and Fort Worth, and since Gino was like a son to Paul, he would loosen up and book the Von Erich boys in Houston. Fat chance. It always bothered me, and I would point out to Fritz that Paul was deliberately holding back his children, but Fritz didn't want to make waves and seem pushy. He was getting his twenty-five percent off the top and didn't want to rock the boat in Houston, so he told me not to "push" his boys on Paul. As the booker, I wanted to push the boys all throughout Texas, but Fritz didn't – because he was more interested in the big payday he got from the Houston office than in the way that his boys were being misused there.

To give you just one example, David was booked for a match in Houston against Killer Karl Krupp, who had just given his notice and was leaving the territory. When Paul and I were going over the card and we got to their match, Paul said that he wanted Krupp to get the pin on David. When I started to point out that Krupp had given his notice, Paul instantly barked, "I'm paying twenty-five percent off the top to Fritz, and now you're telling me how I'm going to run my show?"

I ignored his question and continued, explaining that there was no good reason Krupp should pin David that night. Paul was silent for a few seconds, and then said, "Fine. Have Karl get disqualified - but I want it to be a situation where he's got David in trouble."

Even though I knew Paul was trying to hold back the Von Erich's, I was surprised at how shamelessly blatant he was about it - to the point of demanding heat on a guy that's going to be gone in a couple of weeks. Not only was that bad business, but it was totally unfair. David had earned an opportunity to get a win in Houston - and having him win was the right thing to do for our future.

I was managing Karl that night, so before we went out to the ring, I quietly made a blade and stuck it in my vest pocket. David and Karl had a hell of a match, and just as Paul wanted, Karl beat David down and got disqualified. At that point, I jumped in the ring and told Karl to go back to the dressing room. I then took the blade out, took off my jacket and vest so my white shirt was showing, grabbed David by his hair, shoved him in the corner, punched him, and whispered, "Put the claw on me."

He slapped the claw on me and I bladed myself real good. I bled like a pig, and looked like somebody had thrown a bucket of blood on me. As the fans were going wild, I told David, "Now take me down and get a pin."

As David brought me down, my boy Danny McShain - who was refereeing that night - jumped down with us and slapped the mat three times for a pin-fall. When I got back to the dressing room, Paul was livid - but I pointed out that we got the finish that he wanted. I also pointed out that while Paul may have run Houston - I ran the Texas booking office.

Paul's office was like a museum of wrestling memorabilia. He had every kind of picture you could imagine adorning his walls - such as a 21-year old Lou Thesz standing alongside Ed "Strangler" Lewis - as well as all the early belts that were used in Texas wrestling. In one corner of his office he proudly displayed a bust he had made of The Swedish Angel, in another was the original headress that Chief Big Heart used to wear to the ring, and in the other corner was the lantern that Farmer Jones used to carry. One of Paul's prized possessions was a clay mold that had the imprints of Andre the Giant's hands and feet. Andre was booked against Mark Lewin in Houston, and in order to hype the match, Paul wanted to use Andre's clay imprints as a demonstration, and have Mark put his hands in it to show the difference in size between the two of them. However, when Mark put his hands on the clay piece during his television interview, he accidentally broke the clay model. Even though it truly was an accident because - as Mark's manager - I was standing right there with him, Paul was livid, and booked Mark and I on opening matches in Houston for at least a month afterwards.

Shortly thereafter, Paul informed me that unless Mark Lewin turned babyface, he couldn't use him in Houston anymore. He did that to spite the two of us and to get back at us for breaking Andre's mold, because he knew that we were buddies and liked to hang out together. I turned Mark babyface and programmed him against Gino Hernandez, and on May 16, 1980, the main event in Houston was Gino Hernandez against Mark Lewin in a 2/3 falls, no time limit match - with me hanging from a cage above the ring. Also on the card were Kerry Von Erich,

“Superstar” Billy Graham, Tony Atlas, Mil Mascaras, Jose Lothario, Professor Tanaka, Mr. Sakurada and Bull Ramos. In the program that Paul printed up that night were pictures and bios of all the aforementioned wrestlers except for one: Kerry Von Erich. Paul even made sure to get photos of guys like Harley Race, Lord Alfred Hayes, Pak Song, and Les Thornton in there – and none of them were on the card that night!

I flew to Houston the morning of the show and went to Paul’s office at noon to lay out the finishes with Paul, Bronko Lubitch, and Danny Plechas. We always started with the opening match and worked our way up to the main event, so I asked Paul what he wanted to do with the opener - Kerry Von Erich vs. Mr. Sakurada. He brushed me off, saying, “We’ll get to that match later.”

When I told him I wanted to go over the finishes the way we always did, he shuffled in his seat a bit and sighed, “Well...I want Kerry to get Sakurada over.”

“Paul, you know my policy is not to have the young guys lose in matches like this,” I said. “I don’t do it to Gino, I don’t do it to Kevin, I don’t do it to David, and I won’t do it to Kerry. How can I get young guys over if we beat them with mid-card wrestlers?”

He scoffed, “Sounds to me like the tail is wagging the dog!”

“What do you mean by that?” I asked him.

At that point, he started in with his mantra about how he pays twenty-five percent off the top to the Texas booking office - and how he resents being “told” how to run his business. At that point, I got up out of my chair, walked over to his desk and told him very matter of fact, “You aren’t beating any Von Erich’s as long as I’m the booker. If you want to have a war to see who’ll control Texas, let it happen now, and I guarantee you the outcome will be the same as it was in 1967, and you’re going to lose.”

Then, I walked to the door, turned, and added, “I’m leaving for an early lunch. Danny - you and Bronko are in charge.” I looked at Paul, and asked, “Do you want me in the cage tonight or can I catch an early flight back to Dallas?”

Paul just looked at his desk and muttered, “Be in the cage.”

From there, I went and found Mark Lewin. We had some lunch and then hung out for the rest of the day. I tried not to think about what had happened earlier, because it just frustrated me too much. Kerry Von Erich went to the University of Houston, was heralded in the Houston newspapers as a great athlete, and had all kinds of press - yet Paul would take not advantage of any of it. It was at the point where I would rather Paul didn’t use the Von Erich’s at all instead of flying them into Houston just so he could play games with them and humiliate them because he had something against their father.

I got to the Sam Houston Coliseum fifteen minutes before show time, walked over to Bronko, and asked what the plan was for the Kerry and Sakurada match. When he told me that

they were going to have a fifteen minute Broadway, I went over to Mark, who was making a blade for his match later that night, and asked if I could have it. He was perplexed – but gave it to me. At that point, it was three minutes before bell time, so I called Sakurada and Kerry into a private room and gave Sakurada the blade. I then instructed them, “Kerry - after nine minutes, slap on the claw. Sakurada - I want you to juice real good and put Kerry over right in the middle of the ring.”

Kerry looked at me nervously, and said, “Uncle Gary, I’m supposed to go Broadway. That’s what Mr. Boesch wants.”

“Let’s do what Uncle Gary wants,” I replied. “I want nine minutes and I want juice.”

They went out to have their match, and Paul was sitting at his desk alongside the ring doing commentary. I very seldom watched the monitor - because I preferred the feel of the crowd rather than watching it on TV – but on this occasion I did. When the time was right, and Kerry slapped on the claw and the blood started flowing – Paul did everything he could to not describe what was going on in the ring. He kept talking about other things – completely ignoring the match at hand. He might not have been happy, but the people went nuts. Fritz had been a big star in Houston for years, and this was his kid, and he was using the claw just like his dad. During the break after the match, Paul came back and angrily said, “Gary - that’s not what I wanted.”

“Well that’s what I wanted,” I replied.

Paul then threatened, “I’m going to talk to Fritz about this!”

“Please do!” I yelled. “Tell him that I’m a no good jerk and explain to him exactly what I just did!”

I then went to Bronko and asked him what the plan was for the main event. Bronko said, sheepishly, “Paul wants Mark to beat Gino, and then when they lower the cage, he wants Mark to beat you up as well, leaving you and Gino just laying there.”

That showed me that when Paul wanted to exact revenge on me - he had no qualms about hurting Gino in the process. Gino was a young star, and there was absolutely no reason for him to be buried like that. So, just as I did with Kerry and Sakurada, I pulled Mark and Gino into a private room and told them that after Mark wins the match, Gino and I will beat Mark up, throw him in the cage, lock it, then pull the cage up ten feet above the ring and leave him hanging. Mark looked very uneasy about what I was suggesting, and protested, “Gary, Houston is a good town for me...”

I cut him off right there and said, “Yeah, and Atlanta was a pretty good town for me until you and Don got me fired!”

Mark didn't have another word to say, and dropped the issue. The three of us pulled off the finish like I wanted, and when we got to the dressing room afterwards, Paul was so furious that he left the building without saying a word to anyone.

On Monday, Paul called Fritz and said that from now on he wanted to work with Bronko - because I had "run out of booking ideas." This, coming from the man who wanted a pencil to beat Andre the Giant. By acquiescing to Paul's demand, Fritz not only betrayed me - his booker - but his boys, as well, because he was clearly more interested in the money coming from Houston than he was in standing up and defending us. After that - I never went back to Houston, and Fritz let Bronko run that town. The divide between Paul and the Texas booking office was definitely growing, but the wall of silence that was put up between us was put up by Paul himself. Things were so bad that I knew in my gut it was only a matter of time before Paul made a move and really stuck it to Fritz. Since 1967, he felt his birthright and destiny was to run Texas - and Fritz denied him that chance. That's a long time for hard feelings to fester.

However, it wasn't just my sixth sense that gave me that impression - because just as when Joe Blanchard broke away in 1978 - I began hearing rumors. Tim Brooks had mentioned that in talking to Nick Bockwinkel, Nick was under the impression that Paul was up to something. Then, one Monday in 1981, Gino showed up at my office around noon, and he looked very concerned. "Gary, I have to tell you something," he said. "I stopped by Paul's office before I left town, and Joe Blanchard and Wahoo McDaniel were sitting with him - and they were booking Friday's card."

I should have seen that one coming a mile away. Aside from the rumors, and what Nick had told Tim, I thought it was odd that Paul hadn't called looking for talent for his Friday night show. I also knew that Joe Blanchard was planning something big, because Mark Lewin told me that Joe had recently offered him the opportunity book Southwest Championship Wrestling. Now, what would a small time promoter like Joe need a worldly booker like Mark Lewin for? Then, after Mark turned Joe down, Mark told me, "Gary, something really strange happened. The other day, Paul Boesch invited me by his house for coffee. He asked me if I had any loyalty towards Fritz. I said that I didn't, but I do towards you, so he suggested that maybe it would be best if I went away for a while."

Shortly thereafter, Tim Brooks mentioned that he ran into Wahoo McDaniel, and when he asked Wahoo why he was in Texas, Wahoo claimed he was there for a "golf tournament." It was clear to me that when Mark turned the booking job down, Joe turned to Wahoo. I told Gino to wait in my office, and then went upstairs to Fritz's office, where Fritz, Bronko, and office secretary Kathy White were going over some paperwork.

"The ball has dropped," I announced. "Joe Blanchard and Wahoo McDaniel were seen this morning in Paul Boesch's office booking this Friday's card in Houston."

Fritz didn't believe me, so I went down to my office, got Gino, and brought him in. Gino once again relayed what he saw in Paul's office, and at that point everyone was stunned. Sure enough, later that day, Paul called the office and left word he would be using talent from the Joe

Blanchard's Southwest Championship Wrestling promotion and would no longer be working with us.

That evening, Gino was scheduled to wrestle in Dallas, and as he entered the dressing room, Kevin and David, who had heard what Paul did, jumped him. Bruiser Brody and I interceded to save Gino, and I screamed at the boys to leave Gino alone. Kevin and David were understandably angry, though, because Paul's defection was going to seriously hurt their father's business. Houston was a good town, and it paid the Texas booking office well. I pulled the boys aside, and explained that Gino wasn't the bad guy, and that he was the one that told us what was going on. Once I explained that Gino was just the messenger – and we should, in fact, be appreciative – they understood. They profoundly apologized to Gino, told him how sorry they were, and said that they felt like complete jerks. Gino fully understood, and assured them there were no hard feelings.

However, at the end of the day, Gino was considered one of "Paul's boys," so he started wrestling full-time for Southwest Championship Wrestling, forming a tag team with Joe Blanchard's son, Tully. Losing Gino was very hard on me – but I understood, and never took it personally. Gino lived in Houston, and Paul was like his adopted dad. What really upset me was that Gino was put in a position where he had to make a choice between me and Paul, so when he left I assured him, "If it doesn't work out – I'm always here for you."

I knew that losing Houston was going to be a huge financial blow to my crew, so I immediately started setting up as many spot shows as possible. I wanted to keep my boys busy, so that they could continue making a good living and feed their families. I also switched the weekly Dallas shows from Monday to Friday nights, which not only replaced the void that losing Houston left, but also brought in more Dallas fans because it wasn't held on a school night or a work night.

After Paul Boesch defected from the Texas booking office, he made a big deal about the fact that when he booked NWA Champion Harley Race – he wouldn't show up. He said he "couldn't understand" why Harley would do that to him, and was very "hurt" and "upset" about it. By aligning himself with Southwest Championship Wrestling – an outlaw promotion that recognized the AWA Champion – Paul Boesch effectively denied himself the right to use the NWA World Champion – but Paul never seemed to grasp that concept. He always looked at himself like an independent promoter, and was used to booking champions from the NWA, AWA, and WWF. However, Jim Barnett was booking the NWA Champion at the time, and Jim was one of the guys – along with Eddie Graham and Bob Geigel – who would go crazy when Paul would ask the question of who the "real" world champion was. When Paul broke away, there was no way in hell that Jim was going to allow Paul Boesch to use the NWA Champion anymore. So when Harley didn't make those Houston shows – it was simply because Paul Boesch was no longer an associate of the NWA and we had no obligation to supply him with talent. Besides, since Paul liked to use the WWF and the AWA Champions and ponder about them so much – why wasn't he content to just use them?

Paul was similar to Sam Muchnik. They were great promoters, but not in the same league as men like Jim Barnett and Vince McMahon. Paul Boesch and Sam Muchnick had one town

each - Houston and St. Louis - and they only cared about their respective towns. Men like Jim Barnett and Vince McMahon, however, had territories, and understood the big picture. Paul could never be on their level. Yes, he had a great town – but if that town was not run properly, programmed properly, and consistently stashed with quality talent – then it would fail.

Both Houston and Paul Boesch were never the same after 1981, and Paul suffered the fate of a nomad promoter. He had been affiliated with Fritz Von Erich and the Texas booking office since 1967, and his track record after breaking ties with us speaks for itself: His alliance with Joe Blanchard and Southwest Championship Wrestling lasted until November 1982, when he joined forces with Bill Watts and his Mid-South Wrestling promotion. That continued until April 1987, when he started promoting shows for the WWF. That marriage didn't last very long, either, because by September of that year he retired.

Paul Boesch's ultimate demise - just six years after leaving the Texas booking office - was because every other promoter he got in bed with – Joe Blanchard, Bill Watts, and Vince McMahon – felt he was “too difficult to work with.”



# Chapter 31: World Class Championship Wrestling

In 1981, Fritz Von Erich was approached by representatives of a company named Continental Productions, which was owned by Pat Robertson and the 700 Club. They were interested in producing a weekly one-hour wrestling show – to be called World Class Championship Wrestling – which they would syndicate to independent television stations and affiliates throughout the world. They offered to invest \$30,000 a month in production costs in order to have first-run rights of the show. After their initial airing, the shows would then revert back to Fritz, who would then assume complete ownership. Fritz and I talked it over, and felt that this was an excellent opportunity for us. We also realized how fortunate we were that Continental came to us. They could easily have gone to any other wrestling promoter in North America with the World Class Championship Wrestling concept.

Once the deal was signed, we were informed that Mickey Grant would be spearheading the production of World Class Championship Wrestling. In addition to being the head of production for Continental Productions, Mickey was also responsible for developing new shows for them. We were also told that he was going to bring in a crew of thirty-five people, was going to tape each show in the Sportatorium – a 5,200 seat arena – complete with special lighting, music, enhanced sound, graphics, instant replay capabilities, and five cameras - and he wanted main event matches on each show.

To say we were blown away would be an understatement. I know that it's hard to comprehend today – because televised wrestling these days is consistently presented with a lot of bombast and hoopla - but back then, wrestling on TV was completely different. In 1981, studio wrestling and squash matches were the norm. Georgia Championship Wrestling, Florida Championship Wrestling, The AWA, and Dick the Bruiser's promotion in Indianapolis - the WWA - were all taped in very small studios with a sixteen-inch ring, twenty-five people hooting and hollering in the audience, and three cameras at most – none of them handhelds – every Saturday morning. And the other wrestling territories who eschewed studio wrestling weren't exactly making groundbreaking television, either. St. Louis wrestling aired from the Chase Hotel, which was literally done in front of a live audience at a breakfast buffet setting every Sunday morning. The WWF was doing squash matches in Allentown, Pennsylvania, and the Mid-South Wrestling shows were taped out of a recreation center in Shreveport, Louisiana. The Mid-Atlantic territory, meanwhile, taped their TV in High Point, North Carolina – out of a small room on the third floor of a hotel. They would actually have to carry the ring up and down the stairs in order to do the taping! The one thing they all shared in common, though, was that they presented “slaughter matches” - in which job men and jabronis went out and got pummeled by the main-eventers. World Class Championship Wrestling was going to be taped out of an arena and wouldn't have any job men or jabronis - just main event matches. This was truly going to be a drastic change in the way wrestling on television was produced.

As excited as we were when the deal went down with Continental Productions, when we learned that Mickey would be coming in with a production crew of thirty-five people –

cameramen, sound men, technicians, cable pullers, light pullers, and assistants - Fritz freaked out, and became overly concerned about all the production people –considered “outsiders” - wandering around the sacred domain of the dressing room. He was truly paranoid that they would overhear us talking business and see us manipulating the show. I assured him that all the Texas wrestlers were professionals, and that kayfabe would be in order.

He was also concerned about some of the technical aspects, because when you put microphones on the turnbuckles and underneath the ring to bring out the sound – and use hand-held camera close-ups to enhance the drama of the matches - you’re also leaving yourself open to the chance that the microphones will pick up the wrestlers talking to each other, and the cameras would expose the fact that they’re not hitting each other as hard as we make it seem. I reminded him that what made Texas wrestling different than other territories was that we were snug to stiff in the ring, and we weren’t doing outlandish, ridiculous stuff. It was competitive, and we didn’t mind pounding on one another. And the way I solved the problem of the guys talking to each other during the matches was by telling them that if they needed to talk to each other – just go to the middle of the ring and talk towards the ceiling.

However, the biggest issue that concerned Fritz was that word could get out that I was the matchmaker and TV producer for the Texas booking office, and that the animosity between us wasn’t real. He had this tremendous fear that someone would find out that he and I were actually in bed together, and that I wasn’t really the evil, vicious person who hated the Von Erich’s and was trying to destroy them. He had a point there. If there was a disgruntled employee with Continental Productions - that would have been a hell of a story to go to the local newspapers with. Even though I had been the matchmaker and producer of the KTVT television shows since 1976, all of my dealings with the director of that show – with the exception of a few instances - were through Bronko Lubitch. As far as anyone at KTVT was concerned - Gary Hart was just an evil manager. That was commonplace in all of the territories back then. If the booker was actively on the roster, they never dealt with the TV people, and used someone else as a go-between. In Florida and Georgia, Gordon Solie served as the “executive in charge” and would deal with the cameramen. In the Carolinas, the cameramen would look to announcers Bob Caudle or David Crockett for direction. At that time, no director, producer, or cameraman had ever been smartened up to wrestling.

Here was my biggest problem: I was a tenured booker in the National Wrestling Alliance. I went to the annual meetings and considered all the old-line promoters as peers of mine. Suddenly, I found myself in a situation where a show I was in charge of would be co-produced by a young, hot-shot, head of production for a multi-million dollar production company with TV stations all over the world. How could I co-produce a great television show with Mickey Grant if I couldn’t tell him where I’ve been, where I’m going, and how I’m planning on getting there? If we only communicated through Bronko, then World Class Championship Wrestling would have been just another wrestling show. I was facing an incredibly difficult predicament.

Say, for instance, you and a longtime friend shared a secret – and it was the most special secret in the whole world. After years of keeping that secret, you suddenly found yourself in a situation that in order to be successful and further everything you and your friend have been working towards - you have to tell someone else the secret. Yes, you’re betraying a trust – but at

the same time, you're doing it for a better good. Which way would you go? That was what I was dealing with – and you could never understand how much I wrestled with it - and how much guilt I felt. This particular dilemma I faced might sound silly to some of you - because it's been so long since we protected our business - but it was incredibly difficult for me, because in 1981, the entire wrestling community honored the sanctity of kayfabe.

Now, I had the same love and admiration for kayfabe as all of my peers did, and would never forget my values and my roots - but I also knew that the times were changing. And I'm not talking about heels and babyfaces hanging out together - I'm talking about the one thing no one ever did in wrestling: Expose the business to an outsider. However, I knew in my heart that anything that I gave up regarding the secrecy of our business to Mickey Grant was only for the benefit of the company in terms of revenue, distribution, and ratings. I wasn't going to give up kayfabe – but I had great respect for what Mickey Grant wanted to create, and I couldn't sit there with him and deny that wrestling was manipulated to some extent. I had to put my faith and trust in him, be somewhat candid with him, and have the creativity to keep the genie in the bottle, yet push the envelope at the same time – and that's exactly what I did.

I was in an extremely tough position, though – because while Fritz allowed me to interact with Mickey, he insisted that I kayfabe him to the tilt, and act like a “manager of talent who just wanted to have some input in the show.” So when I met Mickey, I made it clear to him that there would be certain things that we wouldn't be able to discuss around Fritz or any other wrestlers. I warned him that I was going to share things with him that were considered secrets, but that I was doing it for the good of the show, and so that we could make World Class Championship Wrestling different than any other wrestling program. I put my trust in him and explained that sometimes in wrestling we manipulated things in order to draw money. However, I never told him that professional wrestling was a big work, nor did I tell him things like how we bladed ourselves. At the same time, I stressed to Mickey that it could not become common knowledge that I was running the show. I knew in my heart that Mickey wouldn't crack smart with anyone, because he was a classy guy, and I trusted him. And needless to say, he never told anyone.

Anytime I did communicate with Mickey, I had to do it very carefully and in private, and couldn't speak freely even if Bronko Lubitch – my trusted assistant – was sitting there. It was very difficult for me to have to ask Bronko – who I respected immensely - to step out of the room during a production meeting for World Class Championship Wrestling. I would give him a chore - such as asking him to go see if the announcers had their notes – and when I would, Mickey would drop his head a little bit, because he was embarrassed, and understood that I was in a very awkward position. I had to do it, though, because there was no way I could have said what I wanted to say to Mickey in front of Bronko. Had I even slightly broken kayfabe in front of Bronko, he would have lost a lot of respect for me. Plus, he would have gone straight to Fritz – and rightfully so. Fritz would have had a conniption fit if he found out that I was opening up to Mickey, because he felt that if anyone knew I was the boss, it would kill our business. Fritz's mindset was the same that every other wrestling promoter in 1981 had, though, because they were of the old guard, and it was engrained in them to protect the business at all costs. I was of the same era - but I saw the big picture, and really believed in what Mickey envisioned World Class Championship Wrestling to be. At the same time, I also cared about what Fritz, Bronko,

and the other wrestlers would think of me if I was caught even slightly exposing our business to him.

My belief and trust in Mickey's vision is not to say that I merrily went along with all of his decisions. For example, I really disliked it when he would send the ring announcer, Mark Lowrance, down to the ring before the taping began in order to "warm up" the crowd. Mark would actually tell the audience to scream, holler, and make a lot of noise for TV. It seemed like a game show, and it really annoyed me that Mickey felt the need to instruct the fans to cheer – as if the wrestlers weren't capable of making them do it on their own. As time went by, though, I got used to that and it didn't bother me so much. I also didn't like it when he would point a camera at some fans and ask them to get excited. I want people to be spontaneous – and not be programmed and feel obligated to cheer when they see the cameras on them. Eventually, I realized that what Mickey was doing was good for business. If you're sitting at home watching World Class Championship Wrestling, and everyone in the arena looks like they're having the time of their lives – you would want to come to the arena and be a part of it, too!

One idea of Mickey's that I instantly got behind was what he called "Personality Profiles." Personality profiles are very commonplace today – but were quite innovative and revolutionary back then. They're little vignettes in which a wrestler is seen in locations other than the ring in order to enhance their character. For example, we took Buggy McGraw to Wet 'N' Wild once, and taped him acting silly with a bunch of little kids. The reason we did that was because when I first brought Buggy in, he was a big, rugged heel who went in and pounded his opponents down. Mickey Grant picked up on Buggy's dressing room personality, in which he would always imitate Curly from The Three Stooges and the "Nyuck, nyuck, nyuck," and suggested we take the loveable character of Buggy we saw in the dressing room, and put it in the public eye. We did it – and it worked perfectly. Buggy became a major babyface in Texas, and those profiles actually changed his wrestling persona forever.

Fritz hated the personality profiles, though, and questioned why I was putting stuff like that on World Class Championship Wrestling. When I explained it was a way to present wrestlers in a different light – and maybe help a new wrestler get noticed - Fritz countered that the only way a wrestler can get noticed is "in the ring." He also questioned why cameras would be at Wet 'N' Wild in the first place. That particular objection was nothing that a little explanation couldn't take care of, and I assured him we would preface all the personality profiles by having the announcers give a proper lead-in. He couldn't wrap his head around what we were doing with them, though, and constantly gave me grief about them. He was old school, and felt that if something hadn't been done before, we shouldn't be doing it at all.

The show was also groundbreaking in the use of theme songs for wrestlers, and I allowed my top guys to pick out the music they wanted to enter the ring to. Like me, they all loved music, so they took their assignments very seriously. Kevin Von Erich loved Ted Nugent, so he chose "Stranglehold," and even though Bruiser Brody loved Ozzy Osbourne, he preferred coming out to Led Zeppelin's "Immigrant Song." For Kerry Von Erich, Rush's "Tom Sawyer" was a no-brainer due to their "Modern Day Warrior" opening-line reference - because that was Kerry's nickname. The Spoiler entered the ring to "Also Sprach Zarathustra" – long before Ric Flair ever started using it, and David Von Erich chose ZZ Top's "La Grange." The acoustics in the

Sportatorium were so phenomenal that when we played those old rock songs for their ring entrances, it created pandemonium before they even hit the ring.

It's funny, because on TV, the Sportatorium looked like the greatest arena on earth, while in reality it was – pardon my French - a shit-hole. The Sportatorium - at the best of times - was nothing more than a tin building. It was literally just a sheet of tin surrounding wooden benches with no backs. That was it. It was put up to hold jamborees in 1938, was incredibly uncomfortable, and there were never any renovations done on it. It was so ram shackled that when it rained, the water literally would run down the aisles. There was no insulation or air conditioning in the building, either, so in the summer it could easily be 110 degrees in there, and in the wintertime it was colder than you could possibly imagine. Yet, week after week, we would have 5,200 people in there screaming their brains out. Everyone talks about the Sportatorium so glowingly these days, but in reality, it was the worst arena in Texas. It was a total dump. Fans would come from all over the world, and everyone wanted to see the Sportatorium because they were under the illusion that it was this magnificent arena. When they would walk up to the Sportatorium, they would shockingly ask, "Is this the right place?"

World Class Championship Wrestling was also extremely innovative in regards to the announce team. We had Bill Mercer – the voice of the Chicago White Sox, the Dallas Cowboys, and the Texas Rangers - on play-by-play, and Jay Saldi – who was actually playing football for the Cowboys at the time – doing color commentary. How much more high-profile and mainstream can you get than that? Unfortunately, Jay's announcing style drove Fritz crazy. Jay wasn't smart to wrestling, and was really nothing more than a big fan from Chicago. He would get so caught up in the excitement of the matches that he would point out things that seasoned wrestling commentators knew to "overlook." For example, in tag team matches, the Von Erich boys wouldn't play the traditional babyface role and stand in the corner waiting for a tag. They would jump in the ring and the referee would shove them out. And while the referee was shoving them out, Jay would always point out that a Von Erich lost their "cool." That drove Fritz nuts. Fritz finally let Jay go after a match between NWA Champion Harley Race and David Von Erich. David had Harley in a claw, and he didn't break it when Harley grabbed the ropes. When the referee disqualified David, Jay told the audience that is why David will never be a champion - because he gets "too carried away during his matches." He didn't get it that the finish gave us a way out so that Harley could keep his belt and David could still look strong.

We had a budget of \$7,500 an episode – \$5,000 for production and \$2,500 for talent costs. That amount of money just to produce a weekly television show was unheard of at that time in the wrestling world, and it offered me many opportunities to change the way wrestling on TV was produced. For anyone to say that World Class Championship Wrestling wasn't revolutionary, groundbreaking, and a forerunner of what wrestling on TV is today is kidding themselves, because no other wrestling promotion made TV like us at the time. Unfortunately, once the management at KTVT saw how amazing World Class Championship Wrestling looked, they called our office and complained that we were giving our syndicated program better matches than we were to our KTVT show, which was called Saturday Night Wrestling. They accused us of playing favorites, but there was actually no truth in what they were saying. I gave both shows my equal attention, not only because KTVT had been our flagship station for so many years, but also because I always knew the power of KTVT. As good as World Class

Championship Wrestling was – in my heart of hearts I knew that we could not survive without KTVT.

In the early 80's, the expansion of cable television – and specifically the Georgia Championship Wrestling show on TBS - hurt many regional territories throughout the United States, and many bookers in other promotions were consumed with fending off TBS and cable TV. I was extremely lucky, because while TBS hit smaller markets and cities such as Amarillo, it didn't have any penetration in major markets like Dallas and Fort Worth – so I was safe. Therefore, not only was I fortunate to not have the TBS problem, but I was blessed to have had a powerful cable channel like KTVT airing our show throughout the entire south west. Knowing that, I would have been a fool to do anything to jeopardize our relationship with KTVT. Cable television was really growing, though, and at one point during its run, World Class Championship Wrestling made such an impact in the entertainment industry that ESPN came knocking on our door offering us an opportunity to produce yet another weekly TV show! They wanted to give us a primetime slot right after roller derby, but unfortunately, Fritz refused to further talks with them because he didn't want wrestling to be “looked at like roller derby.” I begged him to reconsider, but he wouldn't budge, and it broke my heart. Verne Gagne's AWA ended up getting the ESPN timeslot, instead.

The impact that World Class Championship Wrestling had on our territory was incredible, and the success of the show kicked everything up a notch and business skyrocketed. We immediately went from running in convention centers to arenas and coliseums on a regular basis. As big as wrestling in Texas was - and as big a name as Fritz Von Erich was - once World Class Championship Wrestling hit, his three boys and Bruiser Brody started outdrawing him five to one. Its success also afforded us the opportunity to start running shows in San Antonio again – and officially declare war against Joe Blanchard's Southwest Championship Wrestling. In 1981, Joe still had his lackadaisical attitude, and was still an incompetent, uncreative promoter – yet inexplicably had delusions of grandeur of someday running Texas.

For our first show in southwest Texas since Joe had split from us three years earlier, we hired a local promoter named Fred Behrend, and booked a big show with the Von Erich boys, Bruiser Brody, Ric Flair, and many others in San Antonio. One of the promoter's responsibilities is to secure a ring, so Fred assured us he could get one, and then put none other than Jose Lothario in charge of finding the ring. When I arrived in San Antonio the day of the show, I saw the ring and Jose explained that he got it from a guy who ran independent shows, assuring me it was “a good bump ring.”

The building was packed, and the fans were really excited to see the wrestling stars they had been watching on World Class Championship Wrestling. Then, during the opening match – the ring collapsed. Not only did we have to hold the show up for forty-five minutes to jerry-rig it, but once we set it up - for the rest of the show – no one could hit the ropes! It turns out that while Jose was in the dressing room acting like he was mad at the guy who rented it to him and insisting that it wasn't his fault - he had knowingly bought a rinky-dink ring. When Fred paid Jose \$500 for the ring, Jose got a \$50 ring from some independent Mexican promoter and pocketed the rest. A good businessman would have gone to see the ring, got in it, hit the ropes, and pulled on the turnbuckles to make sure it was stable before he made the deal. Jose just asked

the independent promoter to bring it, set it up, and hoped it worked. Needless to say, we never depended on anyone else to secure us a ring ever again, and always brought a ring with us from Dallas.

I was determined to smoke Joe Blanchard out of San Antonio, and I knew that he was still running his territory on a six week cycle building to his big shows, so I started booking shows in San Antonio once every three weeks. That way, we were either coming in or going out when his big show was shaping up. I also charged \$2 more for our tickets, and had Bill Mercer say that our prices were a little higher because we have more expensive talent. That was a subtle way of saying that our talent was better than what they were used to in Southwest Championship Wrestling - but it was also a gamble. Fortunately, it worked like a charm, and if World Class Championship Wrestling wasn't such a fabulous show – we could never have pulled that one off.

When the war came, Joe Blanchard had a decent crew in place, with a roster including his son Tully, Gino Hernandez, Dick Slater, Wahoo McDaniel, Mil Mascaras, and the Shepherders. However, because of Joe's completely uncreative promoting style, they never gave us any real competition, and we went in there and blew them away. So while he was playing checkers, I was playing chess. I went in loaded for bare with all of the incredible talent from the Texas booking office and the one thing I really wanted to shove up Joe Blanchard's butt: the Von Erich's. Every time we came to San Antonio, I made sure to book one of the Von Erich boys against the NWA World Champion. I did that because he had refused to allow the boys to get over in San Antonio, and I wanted him to know beyond any doubt that I was right about these kids. I also wanted to show him that with his jealousies and penny-anty games, he cost himself thousands and thousands of dollars. I wanted him to see first-hand what he had lost, and I got great satisfaction from seeing the San Antonio fans go crazy for the Von Erich boys, and was so proud and so happy that we went into Joe Blanchard's backyard and drew nothing but sellouts - while he was lucky if he was drawing half a house. Yes, it was vindictive, but I did it with glee.

Joe tried to compete with World Class Championship Wrestling by getting a timeslot on the fledgling USA Network – but it was no contest. As I mentioned earlier with TBS - cities like Dallas and Fort Worth didn't get the USA Network, so it meant nothing. At the time, the USA Network was big in the north east, but in the south west there was only one big cable channel – KTVT – and we had that one locked up. Besides, Joe really got in over his head with that USA show. For some reason, there's this theory that he got kicked off of USA because of an angle in which Scott Casey dumped pig manure over the head of "Hangman" Bobby Jagers – but that isn't the case at all. His show debuted on USA in December of 1982, and the Bobby Jagers-manure angle aired two months later - in February, 1983. Joe's show stayed on the USA Network until August of 1983, and the only reason executives at USA yanked his show off was because, quite simply, Joe Blanchard fell behind on his payments. That's just another example of incompetence on Joe's part – and it's amazing to think that he didn't even realize what he had at the time. Needless to say, when Joe lost his timeslot on the USA Network – the WWF got it and still has it to this day. At that point, Joe's Southwest Championship Wrestling was toast.

World Class Championship Wrestling was the reason the Texas booking office was able to have that kind of success in San Antonio and eventually put Joe's company to sleep. The program came on the air at 10:00 a.m. every Sunday morning via the Christian Broadcasting

Network, and there was nothing on TV at that time other than religious programs – so everyone watched it, and for awhile, it was as if World Class Championship Wrestling was the only thing people cared about in Texas. After its debut episode on November 15, 1981, the show became a huge sensation, and eventually turned into the second ranked syndicated show in America – right behind Soul Train. World Class Championship Wrestling was also one of the first wrestling shows to be sent out by satellite - which meant no more bicycling or sending tapes around – to air in eighty-five cities throughout the United States and in twenty-five foreign countries. It was also an amazing financial success – eventually grossing an astounding \$11 million a year! It was a magical time, but everything just came together perfectly. I had been the booker in Texas long enough to really understand the market, we had a terrific production company, and we were blessed with a talent pool second to none. The only thing that broke my heart was that my boy Gino Hernandez wasn't involved.

World Class Championship Wrestling was the forerunner of what wrestling on TV is today, and it truly changed the face of – and revolutionized - wrestling forever. Of everything that I was ever associated with, I'm more proud of World Class Championship Wrestling than anything. That show had more of me in it than anything else I have ever done. I had a freedom when producing it because I could bring in whoever I wanted and develop whoever I wanted. If no one knows anything about me other than I was the producer and matchmaker for World Class Championship Wrestling - that's fine with me, because that is how I want to be remembered, and helping launch that program is my crowning glory. I only hope the fans enjoyed watching those shows as much as I had fun producing them. In all, I produced over 150 World Class Championship Wrestling episodes, and I stand by every single one of them. I also know that if they were played today - those programs would stand up against any wrestling show that is being produced right now.



## Chapter 32: The Great Kabuki

A couple of chapters ago, I discussed how much I learned from watching Dory Funk, Sr. position his sons while I wrestled in Amarillo, and how I mimicked that in how I booked and built the Von Erich boys in Texas. I learned another great lesson from the Funks – but this time stemming from the death of their booking office in Amarillo. I learned that I had to be very careful and couldn't allow myself to get into a situation where Texas wrestling was based solely on the Von Erich's – the way Amarillo was built around the Funks. I saw first-hand the shortcomings of that strategy, and became acutely aware that I needed other strong, dynamic images and characters in Texas other than the Von Erich's.

Even though I had Bruiser Brody, The Spoiler, Mark Lewin, and Tim Brooks - and all of them were well established in Texas and in the fans minds as main event talent - my dream was to create an evil Japanese character unlike anything the wrestling world had ever seen before. During the 1950's - right after World War II - just being billed from Japan was all that was needed to give a Japanese wrestler enough heat to get into a main event position. That mindset lasted well into the 70's. During that time, Japanese wrestlers were always portrayed as sneaks who "pearl harbored" their opponent before the match and would then throw salt in their eyes. By 1980, though, there was a cultural swing. Americans had items like Honda cars and Sony walkmans - and the Japanese were no longer considered "the enemy." Therefore, just being from Japan wasn't enough to make it as a heel in wrestling anymore, and even though there were a lot of very good Japanese wrestlers - it was real hard to get them to draw money. Most of the Japanese wrestlers - with the exception of Mr. Saito in the AWA - were mid-card guys, or wrestlers who could be referred to as "get over guys."

I love martial arts and always liked Bruce Lee movies, so I wanted to find the right Japanese wrestler and merge martial arts with wrestling. I also wanted him to have a subtle samurai warrior and kamikaze pilot feel about him. I find kamikazes intriguing, because even though Americans look at them as a bunch of crazy people – much like we would look at suicide bombers now - kamikazes are revered in Japan, and only members of elite families could even do such a thing. The centerpiece of my creation was going to be based on something I saw on one of my tours in Asia. I was on a Café Pacific airline going from Singapore to Hong Kong when I saw a magazine with a pictorial on the Kabuki theatre - in which the dancers dressed in long red wigs and wore wooden devil masks. I was obviously looking for a very talented wrestler who could pull this off - because there were so many details I was looking for – but I knew that when I found him I would be able to present him differently than any other Japanese wrestler had been promoted in the past. I mentioned my plan to Bruiser Brody, and told him of the character I wanted to develop. He thought it was a great idea, and one day when he came back from Kansas City, he told me that he may have found my man – a wrestler named Takachiho.

At that time, Brody was going to Kansas City a couple of times a month, so the next time he went, I flew up with him. I watched Takachiho's match that night, and I liked what I saw in the ring. When I introduced myself to him later that evening, he had no idea who I was. He spoke broken English, but it was enough so that we were able to have a conversation. We started talking about Japanese culture - which I had been studying as I prepared for the development of

this character - and discussed martial arts, samurai warriors, kamikaze pilots, and the Kabuki theatre. It was his well-versed knowledge in all of those things that convinced me that Brody was right – he was the one I was looking for. At that point, I told him, “I’m the booker, matchmaker, and TV producer for the Texas booking office. I’m looking to create a new gimmick, and if you’re interested, I would like to give you the opportunity to become The Great Kabuki.”

As he looked at me in disbelief, I then asked him where I could get the outfit of the Kabuki dancers, as well as a samurai sword for this character. He told me that those items could be bought in Los Angeles - which was where he lived at the time. I asked him how much it would cost, and he thought it would run around \$4,000, so I reached into my pocket, whipped out some cash, and asked him to buy the items for me. His eyes widened, and for the first time, he realized this wasn’t a rib. He immediately accepted my offer, and gave Bob Geigel his notice that very night.

When I went back to Dallas, I told Mark Lewin about my new find. Mark was leaving Texas after a long, successful run, and told me he wanted to do something “special” for me on his way out. He said, “I don’t know exactly what, but I want it to be unique.”

Even though I had no idea what Mark was going to do, I knew that if it came from his brain, it would be more than clever. I went out for an interview hyping The Great Kabuki, saying that he came from Singapore, and that during a match in India with Gama Singh, the Indians attacked him, burned his face on hot coals, and scarred him forever. That, I explained, was why he would be wearing face paint. I built The Great Kabuki up to be a monster. When Bill Mercer told Mark Lewin during a later interview that I was bringing The Great Kabuki into Texas, Mark panicked. He actually declared, “If The Great Kabuki is coming to Texas - then I’m leaving.”

Mark ran out of the building at that moment in a frenzy, and Bill Mercer looked in the camera and nervously said, “Maybe The Great Kabuki is as scary as Mark seems to think he is.”

By leaving Texas in that manner, Mark Lewin put the stamp of approval on The Great Kabuki before he even made his first appearance. When it came time for The Great Kabuki to make his big debut, there was a tremendous amount of anticipation – both in the audience as well as in the dressing room. Now I’m not saying the guys in the dressing room wanted to see me fail, but when I walked in with The Great Kabuki on his first night in - they started laughing. My dreaded monster was a mere 5’9” and 215 pounds. Boyd Pierce even declared, “This has got to be the dumbest thing I ever saw in my life. He won’t mean anything.”

Although I was never one to second guess myself, when it came time for The Great Kabuki to go out to the ring and make his first appearance in front of the fans - based on the reaction he got in the dressing room - I was concerned.

That night, The Great Kabuki slowly entered the ring in a stunning outfit, with a bright red wig and a devil mask. When he climbed in the ring and spun his nun-chucks around, the people were in awe. There was a cameraman sitting on the turnbuckle during his pre-match performance, and when he was done with the nun-chuck demonstration, The Great Kabuki threw these amazing looking spider-webs that I got him at the camera. The effect for the viewer at

home was unbelievable. The fans quickly realized that The Great Kabuki wasn't your traditional throw-salt-in-the-eyes Asian heel. He was a mixture of kabuki theatre, mystery, and danger - and he was scary. In order to make him stand out even more, I came up with a cue - an homage to Pak Song - in which during his match, I would say, "Song Song," and he would start screaming and spinning around, and then change styles - from wrestling to the martial arts. To top it off, his finishing maneuver was a tremendous looking super kick. He was spectacular that night, and instantly won the locker room's respect and the audience's fear.

At that point, I needed a strong opponent for The Great Kabuki's first feud - and I figured who better than The Spoiler? I put them together as a tag team, and during every match, they would start pushing and shoving each other. When they would do that, the people would go crazy, because for years they wanted The Spoiler to turn against me and become a good guy. Eventually, it got to the point where the fans got their wish and The Spoiler became a babyface, and The Great Kabuki started a fantastic run against him. Their feud culminated in an amazing series of Dragon Shai matches, in which they both wore helmets, gloves, and used kendo sticks.

The Great Kabuki was a terrific protégé. The only problem I had with him, though, was that he had traditionally been a guy who got other people over, and he was much too giving in his matches. In the beginning, I would have to call him out of the ring, and if you ever see old tapes where he is spinning around at ringside and I'm standing over him talking, what I'm really doing is reminding him, "Hey! You're the star, not your opponent!"

As I mentioned earlier, I was buying these specially made spider webs for The Great Kabuki to throw into the audience before his match, and as spectacular as it was - they were extremely expensive. It got to a point where I was spending \$100 a week out of my own pocket on spider-webs alone! I wanted to look for something else that would not only make him stand out - but would also be more cost effective. One afternoon, my wife was making cookies for our children, and when she accidentally spilled a bottle of green food coloring, I thought, "That's it!"

I called The Great Kabuki and told him to come over to my place immediately. I took a little mouthwash, mixed in some green food coloring, poured it into a condom, and tied it off really tight. We then went out to my backyard, where he put the condom in his mouth and learned how to effectively blow his green mist. Since I knew the green mist was going to be huge, I wanted it to debut with a tremendous impact. I waited until Fritz was giving an interview about some civic project that he was interested in or some politician that he wanted to get behind, and when I felt his interview time had overrun, I stepped in with The Great Kabuki and told him, "Hey horse face, we've heard enough of you trying to get elected Governor of Texas. Believe me - you won't get elected to anything."

Fritz immediately grabbed me, and as he did, The Great Kabuki blew the green mist all over him. When Fritz was standing there all green, the fans didn't know what to think, because they had never seen anything like that before. The following week, when Bill Mercer announced that Fritz had lost partial eyesight, it gave the mist a dramatic affect, really made The Great Kabuki the evil thing that I said he was - and it really freaked the people out.

In order to further the power of the green mist, I booked The Great Kabuki in a match with Bruiser Brody. As Brody picked him up over his head, The Great Kabuki blew the green mist into his face, and Bruiser let out a scream, fell out through the ropes, and started running through the crowd. The people in the audience started going crazy trying to get ice and beer to wash out his eyes. The good thing was that the next day Brody was leaving for Japan, so it allowed us to really sell his “injury.” The Great Kabuki’s green mist became the most talked about thing in Texas, and one day Bill Mercer called me out for an interview and asked me what was in the green mist. Without batting an eye, I replied, “That’s the bile from his stomach, and you people make him so mad and so angry that he has to spit out his bile.”

I laughed my ass off afterwards, but at the time I said it I was in the moment and it just came out of my mouth. It was a legitimate mystery as to what the mist was, though, and whenever any of the guys in the dressing room would ask me what it was, my standard answer was, “Monkey pee.” Surprisingly - no one ever figured out it was food coloring except for one person: My dry cleaner. One day – out of the blue – I went in to pick up my clothes, and he asked me if I worked in a bakery. When I asked him why he would assume that – he told me it was because I always had food coloring on my clothes!

I used to love to bring the midgets in, because I thought it was a good change of pace and something fun for the fans. The Great Kabuki would make a lot of the outfits that he used to wear, so one day I asked him to make an outfit for the midget wrestler Little Tokyo. I then booked a match in San Angelo in which Kevin and David Von Erich would face The Great Kabuki and a mystery partner. The building was full, David and Kevin were in the ring, and out came me, The Great Kabuki...and Little Tokyo dressed up as a Little Kabuki. Needless to say - the audience loved Little Kabuki. The Great Kabuki did his nun-chuck demonstration perfectly, and then Little Kabuki tried to do one and messed it up. The Great Kabuki blew the green mist in the air, and Little Kabuki blew it all over himself. It was hysterically funny, and Kevin and David laughed really hard, as did everyone, because they looked so much alike. Finally, The Great Kabuki threw Little Kabuki out of the ring, and I brought out The Magic Dragon as his partner. I don’t want The Magic Dragon to be overlooked, because he was an essential part of The Great Kabuki’s success, and was the perfect tag team partner for him.

The Great Kabuki was a huge attraction, and he drew big money all throughout Texas. My one regret, however, is that Paul Boesch and the fans of Houston never got to see him. I wish Paul could have had him for just one night, and if I could do it all over again, I would have gone one time for Paul. He would have loved The Great Kabuki and promoted him big time.

Because of The Great Kabuki’s exposure on both KTVT and World Class Championship Wrestling, we started making dates for Bill Watts in his Mid-South territory, where The Great Kabuki quickly won the Louisiana Title. He was then put into a program with The Junkyard Dog, and we took the match to Jackson, Mississippi, one night. Grizzly Smith told me that they wanted The Junkyard Dog to beat The Great Kabuki in the middle of the ring, and I questioned why they would do that if the building was full and the program was fresh. His response was, “Because Bill wants it.”

Before The Great Kabuki and I went out to the ring, I told him that after The Junkyard Dog pins him and leaves the ring, he should attack me with his nun-chucks. He did it, and the building exploded. I told him to do that so he could overcome having just done a job in the middle of the ring and still leave strong. I also told The Great Kabuki that when I go down, not to let anyone in the ring. However, after a few minutes of me laying in the ring and The Great Kabuki pacing back and forth, it was no longer entertaining. A couple of referees ran down, but The Great Kabuki knocked them off the ring apron. Finally, one of them hollered at me that Bill wanted me “out of the ring.” I shot back, “You tell sweet William that if he wants to kill us in this town, I’ll help him. I’ll be back when I’m ready.”

Yes, I was being difficult that night, but The Great Kabuki and The Junkyard Dog were in the beginning of a very hot program, and I could see no reason why anyone would want to beat The Great Kabuki in the middle of the ring the first night in. It didn’t make any sense. I lay there for a little while longer before I eventually got up and limped to the back. When I got to the dressing room, Bill didn’t say one word to me, but it never affected our friendship. I saw what Bill did as a business decision on his part, and I feel that I made a business decision on my part.

The Great Kabuki was such a phenomenal success that I got a call from Jim Barnett one day, asking if I would bring him into Atlanta to appear on his TBS show. I reminded Jim that I had been kicked off of TBS back when it was called TCG by none other than Ted Turner himself. Jim – ever clever – responded, “Well...now you’re bald and you don’t call yourself ‘Playboy’ anymore, so if anybody asks, I’ll say that you’re another guy. And besides – you were banned from TCG – not TBS!”

His reasoning sounded good to me, so The Great Kabuki and I started taking dates in Atlanta to work the Omni on our weekends. The first time we got there, Jim was so excited to promote The Great Kabuki that he came up with a special entrance for him. Jim turned off all the lights in the Omni, played the Darth Vader death march over the loud speakers, and shined a lone spotlight on me and The Great Kabuki as we slowly made our way to the ring. The Great Kabuki would have gotten over in Georgia anyway, but the mood that Jim created just cinched it. The Great Kabuki was such an instant success on TBS that all of the Georgia promoters wanted us on their cards. Jim started sending us out to other towns in his territories, but I refused to work for Fred Ward – no matter how much Jim begged me to - so The Great Kabuki never worked in Macon or Columbus. The local Georgia promoters were so stingy, though. When The Great Kabuki first spit his green mist in their arena, they actually complained because they had to “clean the mat.” Of course, eventually they didn’t care what he did, because he really packed their arenas!

During that period, The Great Kabuki wrestled Dusty Rhodes quite a bit throughout the Georgia territory. The first time they faced each other was in the Omni, and Dusty entered the ring in a full length white mink coat and a big white mink hat. As he entered the ring, The Great Kabuki blew him green, and left Dusty standing there with a green coat and hat. It was fabulous. Another time, Dusty and The Great Kabuki were in the main event in Dayton, Ohio. The city was in the midst of a tremendous ice and snow storm, and we were sure the show would be cancelled. When The Great Kabuki and I got to the arena that night, we were amazed to learn that not only was the show still on, but that the building was turning people away! Simply

because the people turned out in droves on such a horrific night, Dusty and The Great Kabuki put on a great match, and to end it, I even got involved and let Dusty cover the both of us for the pin.

One evening we were at the Civic Center in Columbus, Ohio, and The Great Kabuki was booked against Andre the Giant. We used the same finish we did with Bruiser Brody – in which Andre lifted The Great Kabuki over his head and got sprayed with the green mist. Andre ran screaming through the audience covering his eyes, and the audience became so upset at The Great Kabuki that a riot broke out. When The Great Kabuki and I got back to the dressing room, the promoter was legitimately frightened for our safety because the audience was literally out for blood. It was so bad that the cops had to back a police car into the building to get us out safely. On the way out, I asked the police chief if they had ever taken anyone else out of this building like this before. He replied, “Just once. Nixon during the protests.”

During our trips to Georgia, Jim asked me if there was anyone specific on his roster that I would like The Great Kabuki to wrestle. I chose David Sammartino, who was just starting out in the business, because I figured that having The Great Kabuki wrestle Bruno’s son would be more effective than just any old guy on the card. However, I also instructed The Great Kabuki to take care of David during their matches, and I did that to show Bruno whatever ills he thought about me for the past decade just wasn’t true. We always had a great time with David, and he was a terrific sport. On Halloween night in Marietta, Georgia, I asked David what he wanted the finish to be for their match, and he said, “Since it’s Halloween – let’s have The Great Kabuki blow me green!”

I really liked David, and respected the fact that he never took advantage of the fact that his dad was Bruno. He was a lot like the Von Erich boys in that way. I don’t know why he and his father have problems with each other these days, and it’s sad, because Bruno raised a real nice kid.

Bob Armstrong was a big card in Georgia – and I even got into a program of my own with him! I really enjoyed working with him, and he was so good in the ring that I knew I was in good hands when I wrestled him. Our feud was so hot in Georgia that to this day, when I see his kids, I always ask them who their dad was working with when they had their best Christmas - and they all point to me!

During this time, Roddy Piper was announcing the TBS show alongside Gordon Solie. At the time, Roddy was wrestling in the Carolinas, but Jim Barnett would fly him into Atlanta every week to serve as a heel announcer as a clever way to get him established in Georgia. Roddy really got behind me and The Great Kabuki, and was instrumental in getting us over in Georgia, because he would go over the top in his announcing whenever we came out. Roddy and I really clicked and we had a great relationship, so on one occasion where I had to fly back to Dallas for a big show, we worked out an angle where Roddy would manage The Great Kabuki for that weekend in the Omni. Since we taped the TBS shows at 9:00 a.m. every Saturday morning, I flew in for the taping, and Roddy kept saying on the air that “for just once” he would love to manage The Great Kabuki, and “have the power to control him.” I used to wear a big, gold ring on my index finger. It had two rubies, two emeralds, and the head of a dragon. When it came

time for my interview, I went out and gave Roddy that ring, telling him, “In this ring lies the power to control The Great Kabuki.”

After “transferring” the power, I took a 12:30 p.m. flight back to Dallas, and Roddy managed The Great Kabuki at the Omni that weekend. Roddy, The Great Kabuki, and I continued as a tandem in Georgia, even teaming up for a six-man tag team match in the Omni against Tommy Rich, Dick Slater, and Bob Armstrong. During our interviews to hype the match, I announced that I was so confident no one would get their hands on me that I would wear my finest three-piece suit. Of course, by the end of the match, my suit was completely torn off.

One day after a TBS taping, Jim Barnett told me he was looking for a new, young, good looking wrestler to feature on TBS, because Tommy Rich had just done phenomenally well. I told Jim that I had just the guy for him – Gino Hernandez. Jim was familiar with him, and asked me to bring him in with me next week. When I got back to Dallas, I called Gino - who was working for Joe Blanchard’s promotion at the time – and told him I got him a booking for Jim Barnett. I didn’t care that I was going to give one of Joe Blanchard’s biggest stars exposure on TBS - I just wanted to help Gino’s career in any way I could. Gino was excited and flew to Atlanta with The Great Kabuki and I the following weekend. He worked TBS in the morning and the Omni that evening, and even had a meeting with Jim Barnett that day which went very well. Unfortunately, when Gino told Paul Boesch about his opportunity to work for Jim Barnett, Paul put the kibosh on it. Paul still harbored bad feelings towards Jim from when he was booking the NWA Champion, and Harley Race pulled some no-shows after Paul left the Texas booking office. I was really disappointed in Paul’s refusal, because Gino was so special to me. If Paul was smart, he would have flown Gino to Atlanta every Saturday morning for exposure on TBS, and then used that to his advantage and put him in the main event every Friday night in Houston. Little things like years-old no-shows are so meaningless in the grand scheme, yet they prevented so many good things from happening.

One of the nice things about working in the Omni was that it gave me an opportunity to see guys from other territories that I didn’t normally get to spend time with. For one special evening, my old friend George “The Animal” Steele” came in to team up with Dusty Rhodes. That was a unique situation, because George was pretty much an exclusive WWF wrestler, and it was a rare opportunity for fans outside of that territory to see him. Unfortunately, George’s appearance in Georgia turned out to be a one-shot deal. According to George, Ole Anderson – Jim Barnett’s booker - sandbagged it, and didn’t want George coming in after that night. George was upset and even thought that I might have been involved – but I assured him that my title of “Booker” only carried weight in Texas. When I was in Georgia, I was just like him – hired help picking up dates.

The schedule that The Great Kabuki and I kept during this time period was pretty crazy. We would leave The Sportatorium after the matches every Friday night and fly to Atlanta, arriving at 4:00 a.m. We would be at the TBS station at 9:00 a.m. for the taping, and then work again that night. Then, we would do two shows on Sunday – an afternoon card and an evening match at The Omni. After The Omni, we would catch the red eye back to Dallas, and I would be in the office at 9:00 a.m. Monday morning. They were tough weekends, and we worked our butts off, but we loved every second of it.

Eventually, I started getting a lot of flak from Fritz for taking outdates. He felt that since I was the booker of his territory, I should be focused on one thing and one thing only: Texas wrestling. That really insulted me, because I had never missed a day of work, a meeting, a TV taping, or a big show - and I never fell behind on my booking responsibilities. Besides, a majority of outdates I accepted were on my days off and didn't interfere with my duties in Texas. And whenever I would travel, I always left the phone numbers of the hotels and arenas I would be at with both Fritz and Bronko. I was very conscientious about that, and I loved my job as booker too much to shirk any responsibilities. So while I was taking outdates for Jim Barnett, at no time did I ever forget that first and foremost I was the booker of the state of Texas, and that I was responsible for making everyone involved with the Texas booking office money. Week after week - even as I made my appearances in Georgia - I was still coming up with creative angles and hot matches, and Texas was on fire! Besides, I felt that I had the right to take outdates. The Von Erich boys took outdates. Bruiser Brody took outdates. Why couldn't I? And it's not as if I was the only booker that took outdates in Georgia. Dusty Rhodes was booking Florida for Eddie Graham, and Harley Race was booking Kansas City for Bob Geigel, and Jim Barnett was bringing them in on a weekly basis, as well!

The real reason Fritz was upset was because he resented that I had another source of income via Jim Barnett. I was guaranteed \$2,000 a weekend in Georgia, so by going four times a month, I was making an extra \$8,000 a month. When Fritz learned that, he screamed, "How much money do you need to make?"

Since it upset Fritz so much, I cut back on outdates - just to appease him. As hard as it was for me to decline bookings from Jim Barnett, I wanted to show Fritz that - aside from my family - Texas wrestling was the dearest thing in my life.

Soon after, Ole Anderson called me asking if he could book The Great Kabuki for the Omni that upcoming weekend. When I told him that there was no way I could accommodate that, Ole begged, "I already advertised him! I have to have him!"

"I'll do something for you, but don't tell anybody," I told him. "I'll send you The Magic Dragon instead."

Ole nearly blew his top, insisting, "No! I need The Great Kabuki!"

I explained to Ole that I would send The Magic Dragon as The Great Kabuki - and assured him that nobody would be able to tell the difference. And that's exactly what we did. In fact, The Magic Dragon went to Georgia many times at The Great Kabuki - and no one ever knew he wasn't the real deal. If you're reading this, and saw The Great Kabuki during the early 80's in Georgia, the way you can tell who you saw is if I was there or not. If I wasn't, then you saw The Magic Dragon. I managed The Great Kabuki on every one of his appearances, save for that one time with Roddy Piper at the Omni.

The Magic Dragon was the sweetest guy in the world, and I just adored him. At one point, a promoter in South Africa wanted The Great Kabuki for a five week tour. The Magic



Dragon had just gotten married, and The Great Kabuki thought it would be a nice wedding present if he went as The Great Kabuki, so The Magic Dragon and his wife could go and have a nice time. Unfortunately, on the way to South Africa, the plane went down and everyone was killed.

## Chapter 33: Christmas 1982

I lived in North Dallas, and everywhere I went - airports, restaurants, supermarkets - people recognized me. Between my weekly appearances on KTVT, WTBS, and World Class Championship Wrestling, I was seemingly on TV every day, and became so famous it was overbearing at times. However, I also noticed that many of the people who recognized me seemed to be casual fans of wrestling. They would watch it on TV every week, but weren't the type to go to an un-air conditioned building like the Sportatorium and see us live. I understood that we had a hardcore group of wrestling fans who would show up to see us no matter where the show was, when the show was, or what the weather was like, but I also understood that in order for Texas wrestling to get to the next level, we had to inspire our casual fans to want to see us live. With that in mind, I felt that if I promoted a big show properly, I could get our casual fans to see us in a building like Texas Stadium or the Reunion Arena a few times a year.

This was not a decision I made lightly, because if I booked a "super card" in the Reunion Arena - which held 21,000 people - and only brought in 5,200 people - which is what we drew every week at the Sportatorium - I would be putting my job at stake. However, I was confident I could pull this off. I knew that in order to make these super cards really stand out in the fans minds - and to be able to promote them differently than I normally would - they would need to have a catchy, memorable name.

At the time, my sons were gigantic Star Wars fans, and had all of the figures and play sets. God, I must have spent hundreds of dollars on those toys. I was watching them play on the floor one day with toys like the Bespin Guards and the Hoth Ice Planet - and then it hit me: Wrestling Star Wars. When I first presented the idea to Fritz, he liked the super card concept, but felt that it may be copyright infringement to call it Star Wars. He had his attorneys check it out, and they assured us that as long as we called it "Wrestling Star Wars" we would be safe.

We scheduled our first big show on October 25, 1981 at the Reunion Arena, and when the announcers started talking about it, it was clear that this was going to be something special. And sure enough, the fans who wouldn't see us regularly were inspired to go to Wrestling Star Wars just based on the hype. On the night of the show, we hung three disco balls in the building so there were blue and white lights with stars all over the place, we had smoke and strobe lights for the wrestler's entrances, and we used the soundtrack to the Star Wars movie for the opening ceremony. Compared to what's done today it wouldn't be all that much - but for those days it really was a fabulous production. The night was a huge success, and we brought in so many more fans than we normally did that I set up a schedule in 1982 so that I could build to four more big shows - one in March, June, August, and the final one on Christmas night - to be held in large arenas like Texas Stadium and the Reunion Arena. By building to four big shows a year, I knew I could make my top guys \$20,000 just on those shows alone - and that was very important to me that my crew knew they were all figured in for some big paydays. Sure, they could get \$250 in Fort Worth and \$300 in Dallas every week - which was good - but nothing compared to what they could make on the big shows.

During this time period, even though Fritz had been wrestling on a part-time basis for a few years, he announced to me one day, “Your five years are up!”

If you recall – when Fritz brought me in as booker in 1976, he told me that he wanted to be out of the ring in five years. It was now six years later and time for him to have his retirement match, so I started looking around for his final opponent. I saw a job-guy from Florida named Big Daddy Bundy – and I knew I could make a monster out of him. I got in touch with him through my friend Kevin Sullivan, and when I told Bundy that I had a spot open for him in Texas to work with Fritz Von Erich, he realized this was his big break and jumped at the offer. Once he arrived, I had him sit in the audience for all of our TV tapings, and anytime Fritz would come out for an interview, Bundy would heckle, “Hey old man! It’s about time you retired!”

Fritz would just look at him, and carry on with his interview. We did this a couple of weeks in a row in both Dallas and Fort Worth, and one day while Fritz was doing an interview, I walked out with Bundy. Once Fritz realized that I was the one behind his heckler, the challenge was made – and we were ready.

I changed his name to King Kong Bundy, put him in a singlet, and also came up with the gimmick where he had to cover people for the count of five rather than three. I looked at that as a subtle thing to put him in a different category than the other monster heels. Then, I booked Bundy in a couple of matches that drew well, but stunk. Bundy was never more than a six-minute guy, in my opinion. Don’t get me wrong - I like him, but let’s be honest - he was limited. Even though he was green, I booked him for our first Texas Stadium show against Fritz in his retirement match. After his match with Fritz, Bundy had a hair vs. hair match with Kerry where he got his head shaved. Believe it or not, Bundy looked like Yukon Eric or Klondike Bill when he came to Texas. In addition to his head, I also had him shave his eyebrows - because I was envisioning him to be like Skull Murphy - and that gave Bundy the perfect look, because he was real light skinned. I’ve heard everyone from Bill Watts to Fritz Von Erich get credit for creating King Kong Bundy’s gimmick – but I assure you it was me. Success has many fathers, but failure is always a bastard.

In addition to my regular crew in Texas, I also brought in names from other territories such as The Junkyard Dog and Ernie Ladd from Mid-South, Andre the Giant from the WWF, and NWA Champions Harley Race and Ric Flair to give Wrestling Star Wars added prestige.

It’s sad to say, but my scheduling the big Texas shows is where Fritz and my relationship started going downhill. When I was hired as the booker in 1976, the average house in Dallas was \$4,600. By 1982, I had gotten the average up to \$14,800 per show. In 1976, Fort Worth was averaging \$2,600 a show, and by 1982, I had brought it up to \$9,200. Keep in mind that all of those averages don’t include the big shows at the Reunion Arena and Texas Stadium. Based on the deal that Fritz and I made when I was hired, my average weekly commission on the Dallas shows was \$1,020, and my average in Fort Worth was \$660. After awhile, Fritz resented paying me \$1,680 every week in commission, and tried to downplay the success I had in raising the averages by claiming the real reason the houses were going up was because “we were charging more” - and not because I was getting more people in the building. Fritz must have been awfully

poor as a child, because I've only known a few people with his type of greed in my life. He was intent to keep every penny he made for himself, and money was like his God.

It was clear to me that Fritz was just being greedy, and looking for a way to get out of our original agreement. Fritz also knew that once we started running in the bigger arenas like Texas Stadium and the Reunion Arena, the houses were sure to jump drastically, and he felt that in big buildings like those – which cost more to run in - I shouldn't hold him to our original deal. My feeling was that I helped him bring Texas wrestling into the big-time, got us in a position where we could get into big buildings, and tripled our attendance. As far as I was concerned - I deserved that commission.

I called Jim Barnett and told him of the impasse Fritz and I were at. He felt it was a simple problem to solve, and suggested I take the house we drew for the first Star Wars in October 1981 - which was \$50,000 - and add the \$14,000 weekly average from the Sportatorium. Then, for any of the future big shows that gross over \$64,000, I would make \$100 for every \$1,000. "There's no way he can say no to that," Jim said. "It's more than fair."

Even though I could have asked for a lot more, I was really trying to make this work. I also knew that if I got \$50,000 in for the first big show, I could do better the next time out. I presented that deal to Fritz, and he begrudgingly agreed to it.

When The Great Kabuki and I were traveling to Atlanta on our weekends to make appearances on TBS and at the Omni, Michael Hayes and Terry Gordy were wrestling for Georgia Championship Wrestling. They had been together since 1979, calling themselves The Fabulous Freebirds, but they broke up in 1981 and were feuding throughout the territory. I was sitting in the back of an arena before a show one day, when the two of them approached me and asked what I thought about the fact that they had just broken up. I told them that whoever advised them to break up did them a great disservice, because they were just perfecting The Fabulous Freebirds gimmick, and were getting so hot that the last thing they should have done was even consider breaking up their act when they did. They both nodded their heads and gave me a look like they agreed with me one-hundred percent. I then assured them, "Look, guys. If you decide to reform, give me a call. I would love to have The Fabulous Freebirds in Texas."

And I meant that. I knew what a great act they had, and there was no doubt in my mind that they would get over phenomenally well in Texas. Also, keep in mind that the World Class Championship Wrestling show was not a year old yet, and I was well aware that the show was giving the world a new look at Texas wrestling. And as the producer and matchmaker of the show, I couldn't have a fresh start with talent who had been there a long time. I needed new blood, so I was very happy when Michael called me saying that he and Terry would like to reform The Fabulous Freebirds. Needless to say, I immediately brought them to Texas. I wanted to bring them in as heels and have them feud with the Von Erich boys, but Fritz felt that it would be better to bring them in as friends of the Von Erich boys. I went along with that, and shortly after The Fabulous Freebirds started appearing on our programs, entering the ring to the music of Lynyrd Skynyrd's "Freebird," as good as business had been - it picked up. I instantly knew that The Fabulous Freebirds were going to be the next big thing in Texas.

Then, without anyone paying attention, I booked Kevin and David Von Erich against The Fabulous Freebirds in Lawton, Oklahoma - just to see if there was any chemistry between them. I always felt that The Fabulous Freebirds against the Von Erich's would be a match made in heaven, but that one match told me everything I needed to know, and the electricity they created that night convinced me that I was going in the right direction. I'm very pleased to look back and realize I gave The Fabulous Freebirds a rebirth in Texas, because it would have been a shame for them to have remained broken up after 1981. And when I brought in The Fabulous Freebirds, I realized that not only would I get a great series of matches between them and the Von Erich boys, but I would also get a huge bonus match: Bruiser Brody vs. Terry Gordy. Who wouldn't want to see that? I booked the two of them together quite a bit, and their matches were always excellent. The Fabulous Freebirds also really helped me solidify World Class Championship Wrestling as a TV show ahead of its time, and they deserve a lot of credit for the success of that show.

I can also take credit for reuniting all three of The Fabulous Freebirds in 1982. One night, Buddy Roberts - a former member of The Fabulous Freebirds who left the group in 1981 - came down to visit with Michael and Terry before a show. I had known Buddy since 1970, when I met him at Madison Square Garden, and had really gotten to know him when he was a member of The Hollywood Blondes during my 1974 run in Florida. I even brought him into Dallas in the late 70's as Dale Valentine - billing him as the brother of Johnny Valentine. As Michael, Terry, and Buddy were talking and reminiscing, I realized that since I had three Von Erich's, I should also have three Fabulous Freebirds - so I asked them if they would consider reuniting the original trio. Michael, Terry, and Buddy were excited about my idea, and Buddy agreed to re-dye his hair blonde and join up with The Fabulous Freebirds that very night.

When I assumed the book in 1976, I inherited five titles, and over the years I created seven more. I trusted my crew, and while I didn't require a deposit for the title or anything like that, I was always cautious on who I put belts on, and didn't just give them to anyone. Titles were, to me, just a way to add some drama to matches by putting the belts on the line, tools to get the fans into a match, and a great way to get a wrestler over, but a lot of the guys took the titles a little too seriously, and would rather make \$150 and be a "champion," than make \$200 and put another champion over.

There were many different techniques that I used to give a title match added luster. A lot of times I would book a non-title match in, say, Fort Worth with the NWA Champion. Take Harley Race vs. Kerry Von Erich, for example. The stipulation would be that if Kerry won, the return title match would be in Dallas, and if Harley won, their following title match would be in St. Louis, Missouri. By doing something so subtle like that, it made it seem as if their match was so over and so important that multiple cities wanted it and were actually bidding for it. I also used phantom title switches as a positive thing to say that our champion was so popular that he was traveling the country defending the title. For example, I might have our announcer say that the American title changed hands in someplace like Portland or Los Angeles, which not only made the champion look bigger than he was, but it also made the belt seem more important than it really was. See, I didn't look at it like a "phantom switch," I looked at it as a way to give credibility to the champion, his popularity in other areas, and the importance of the title - because more than one state wanted it. When it came to titles in the Texas booking office, I had a grand

scheme, a clear overview, a long-term vision of where I was going, and I did every title change and every phantom switch for a specific reason.

In any event, the titles I inherited were the American Title and the American Tag Team Title - which is what the top guy and the top tag team in the area held, The Texas Title and the Texas Tag Team Title - which were important because all of the fans connected with Texas, which made them very powerful belts, and the Brass Knuckles Title - which was defended in anything goes, no disqualification matches. They were the major titles in Texas, and were institutions that had been around for years. However, no matter how many titles Texas had, the one that was respected more so than anything else was the NWA World Title.

In 1979, I found myself in a bit of a jam. Our weekly show on KTVT was ninety minutes, and featured seven matches. I realized that since we were giving all seven matches away for free on TV, there was no incentive for our semi-casual fans to come to see the taping live. Since ratings meant nothing back then, my responsibility as booker was to bring live attendance up, so I immediately pulled two matches off TV, and in their place I started booking 2/3 falls matches for a TV Title. That 2/3 fall match immediately covered three of my segments, and if any of the fans at home wanted to see the other two matches, they would have to come to the arena and buy a ticket. Therefore, I brought the TV Title to Texas simply because I could no longer give away everything on TV. Other than that – what purpose does a TV Title really have, anyways? As Terry Funk once asked, “A TV Title? What about the Dishwasher Title or the Vacuum Cleaner Title?”

The NWA shared one World Champion, but all the territories had their own version of the World Tag Team Title. Florida, Detroit, and Georgia had - at one time or another - their own World Tag Team Titles - but Texas never had one. Therefore, in 1981, I saw to it that we finally got a World Tag Team Championship Title of our own. I also created a lot of other titles for Texas, such as the Caribbean Title, which was good for Fort Worth, because the Latinos would line up to see it defended, The Women’s Title, although that was just a one off thing, and the All Asian Title and the All Asian Tag Team Title. Those particular belts were to satisfy the Japanese market, because World Class Championship Wrestling matches occasionally aired on TV-Tokyo. Whenever I introduced new titles like that, I would have Bill Mercer explain that they were well-respected titles in Japan or the Caribbean, and introduce it in a way that was acceptable to the fans. Anyways, the reason I’m going into all of this detail about titles in Texas is because when The Fabulous Freebirds started, I brought yet another title to Texas: The Six Man Tag Team Title. Instituting that one was a no-brainer, though, especially given my long term plans for The Fabulous Freebirds and the Von Erich’s.

As I mentioned earlier, I had booked the Von Erich’s and The Fabulous Freebirds in a match in Lawton, Oklahoma, just to test the waters. There was no angle, and they were both fan favorites, but based on their chemistry that night, I knew I had something big, and that I could get a year and a half run out of them - easy. I wanted a long term program, so I knew I would have to set the stage very carefully and really convince the fans that this was a truly personal battle. I also knew that in order for this to work, I had to do something outlandish that had never been done before. And while what’s remembered today is the big angle itself, not many people recall the buildup – and I put just as much thought into the buildup as I did to the actual angle.

Building to a big angle is like baking bread: You have to let the build rise and have to watch it, and know exactly when it's ready.

Since Kevin and David had wrestled Harley Race for the title so many times, I booked Kerry Von Erich vs. Ric Flair in a cage match for the NWA Title on Christmas night 1982. A couple of weeks before the match I set up an angle on TV with Michael Hayes and Ric Flair to show there was no love lost between them. Then, I had a "contest" in which the fans "voted" Michael Hayes to be the special trouble-shooting referee and Terry Gordy as the keeper of the cage door. Finally, to really lull the fans into a false sense of security, I booked a six-man tag team match for the undercard in which Michael Hayes, Terry Gordy, and David Von Erich would team up against "Iron" Mike Sharpe, Ben Sharpe, and Tom Steele. I very carefully set it up so that there was no possible way that Ric was walking out of the cage with the belt that night - and completely stacked the odds in Kerry's favor. I built the match up so well that we brought in an astounding \$102,000 that night - and it was all because the fans really thought they were going to see the world title change hands. They had no idea what we had in store for them.

During the match, referee Michael Hayes turned on Kerry Von Erich, "keeper of the door" Terry Gordy slammed the cage door on Kerry's head, and Ric Flair covered Kerry for the pin. And fortunately - or unfortunately - we laid it out so perfectly that we nearly had a full scale riot on our hands. Even though I knew that when Terry slammed the door on Kerry's head it would be money in the bank - this got over beyond my wildest imagination. I'm very proud of that particular angle, and it makes me very happy to know that people still talk about it to this day. The legend of that night just spread like wildfire, and the following few weeks we did unbelievable business. Anywhere we went, business was gigantic. At that point, I was on a roll. The buildings were full, novelties were selling, and the concessions were packed. You would think Fritz would be thrilled, and happy to compensate me for a job well done - but he had forgotten who brought him to the dance.

In mid-January 1983, I got my checks for the Christmas show. I always got a payoff for booking, a payoff for managing, and a bonus based on the house - if it was in order. When Bronko gave me the envelope in my office, his head was down. He couldn't even look at me. When I opened the envelope, I saw that I got my weekly \$700 check for being the booker - never having gotten a raise in over six years, a \$2,100 check for managing and appearing on the show, and a \$2,000 bonus based on the house.

I couldn't believe it. I booked a card that brought Fritz over six figures, and he threw a \$2,000 bonus my way? Based on our new deal, I deserved a \$3,800 bonus.

It might sound greedy on my part to be complaining about this - but keep in mind that if Fritz and I had kept our original deal, he would have owed me \$9,000 - so believe me, I was making a huge compromise - and was still getting gypped. Plus - this was the fourth super card I booked in 1982, and he underpaid my commission on every one of them. Also, if you recall in the prior chapter, I had just given up making appearances for Georgia Championship Wrestling on my days off - and making an extra \$8,000 a month - simply because it upset Fritz. After all of that - what would you have done? Spoken up to your boss about it or just allowed it to continue?

If you think I'm greedy for the way this story transpires - then so be it. I take responsibility for my actions.

After I saw my bonus check, my mind was racing, and I was steaming mad. I was so angry I started cursing, and my old and dear friend Danny Plechas came into my office to try and calm me down. It was a good thing he was there, because I wanted to go upstairs and choke Fritz. I made it clear to Danny that it was the bonus I was upset about, and to emphasize my point, I wadded up the check and threw it across the room. Danny, God love him, asked me to overlook it, reasoning, "Kid, why don't you just let it roll off your back? It's still a \$2,000 bonus!"

"Danny, I'm not made that way," I said. "I can't accept this."

At that point, I went upstairs and told Bronko, "I want to see Fritz right away."

Bronko jumped out of his chair, exclaiming, "He's on the phone!"

I walked right past him and straight into Fritz's office.

"What do you want?" Fritz bellowed.

"I got you over \$100,000 – the biggest house in the history of Texas, and you throw \$2,000 my way?"

"Oh! So now you want a part of the profits!"

"That's my deal! I get a percentage of whatever we do, and you've never paid me properly on the big shows. I want the commission that we agreed to and that I deserve for the Christmas show!"

"No way," he said. "Absolutely not."

"You know what Fritz? I've had it with you, and I'm finished as of today."

"I know you are," he yelled, "because I'm firing you."

From there, I went down to my office, took the picture of me and Gino Hernandez off my wall, and walked out of the Sportatorium.

That's how my run as the booker in Texas ended.

Bruiser Brody, Michael Hayes, Terry Gordy, and Buddy Roberts all showed up at my house that evening and pledged their allegiance to me. Michael even offered, "Do you want us to quit in protest? You brought us in here, and we came here to work for you."



I was very touched by their loyalty, but told them, "Please don't do that. I'll never get another booking job in my life if word got out that when I leave I take all my talent with me. Besides, you owe it to yourselves to stay here, because you're all going to make a lot of money. This place is red hot."

Later that night, each one of the Von Erich boys called me, telling me how sorry they were. I assured them, "This does not affect us. This is between me and your father. It has nothing to do with you."

That was the truth. It was between me and Fritz, and after butting heads for almost seven years, it just got to the point where we were tired of dealing with each other.

Since 1976, I had been a booker, babysitter, chaperone, manager, wrestler, matchmaker, TV producer, and wet nurse to a motley crew of guys, produced four hours of quality programs a week, and oftentimes booked fourteen house shows a week - all without a vacation. I had my wars with Paul Boesch, Joe Blanchard, Nick and Jerry Kozak, and Fritz Von Erich. I had taken all the responsibility for west Texas - which were considerable - and my patience was wearing thin. No matter how much success I had at the box office, it seemed like I wasn't doing enough - and Fritz refused to pay me what I rightfully earned. Everything became a constant struggle. Did I really want to continue the day to day grind?

Besides, I had been running that company for almost seven years, and it was obvious I was leaving on a high note and the territory was at its peak. I had set up The Fabulous Freebirds vs. the Von Erich's and Bruiser Brody vs. Terry Gordy - so Fritz knew he was in a no-lose situation and would have big money coming in no matter who had the book.

After I quit - or was fired - depending on who's telling the story, Fritz started calling promoters around the country telling them that I was nothing but an "alcoholic and a drug addict."

Now, if he had said that I smoked marijuana, he would have been telling the truth - but I was never an alcoholic, and I was never a drug addict. Those were out and out lies. Plus, they were such stupid lies. I had just spent the last seven years running his wrestling company. By spreading that lie about me, what was he saying about him and the people he entrusts to run his company? When you hire someone to run your company, the person you choose says a great deal about you. And when you keep them in that position for close to seven years, that really says a lot about you. Every promoter was well aware that I had built up the Von Erichs, The Great Kabuki, Gino Hernandez, Bruiser Brody, and The Fabulous Freebirds during my run, and that I had just instituted World Class Championship Wrestling and several super cards a year throughout Texas. If I was nothing but an alcoholic and a drug addict, then I would imagine every promoter would have suddenly wanted a drunk and an addict working in it.

## Chapter 34: North Carolina

After seven years with no vacation, I took advantage of my situation and did nothing but spend time with my wife and kids. I also took some time to regroup and figure out what I wanted to do next. The Great Kabuki was very loyal to me and left the Texas booking office shortly after I was gone. He went back to Los Angeles, because he had just bought a home with the money he made in Texas, and he also wanted to give me time to decide where our next move would be. I felt that since I had great success with The Great Kabuki in Texas, Georgia, Louisiana, and Oklahoma, that we could have the same impact in the Carolinas.

Jimmy Crockett was someone who I had met several times at the Alliance meetings, talked to on the phone over the years, and considered a friend of mine. I had also left on very good terms with his father a decade ago, so I called Jimmy up to see if there were any openings in the Carolinas, and made it clear I wanted to come in as The Great Kabuki's manager - and not as a booker. Jimmy couldn't have been more gracious, and told me that he would be thrilled to have us. It was actually quite a big deal to be able to get into the Mid-Atlantic territory that quickly, because there was such a long waiting list for other wrestlers to get in. At the time, there were two territories with such sought-after spots that they actually had waiting lists to get into: The WWF and the Mid-Atlantic area.

I flew into the Carolinas in March, 1983, to start hyping The Great Kabuki's arrival on television interviews. Jim Barnett even sent me tapes of The Great Kabuki's matches from TBS, and Crockett's production crew made a video montage of them and I presented it as something that I had prepared. The video was great, and really showed the theatrics, the mystery, and the danger of The Great Kabuki.

I brought my wife and two sons with me, and we moved into a beautiful hotel in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina called The Ocean Plaza. My boys never minded changing schools, and accepted the fact that if they wanted us to live as a family unit – all four of us together every day and every night – then they would have to move to where dad worked. Of course, it helped that they were always in first class surroundings – but they were always good sports. We would spend our evenings watching movies on cable TV – and one movie my boys just loved was Mel Brooks' "History of the World Part One." My wife didn't want me letting the boys watch it because it was so dirty – but I pointed out that they weren't even understanding the dirty jokes, and that they just liked laughing at the silliness. I was a cool dad, though. During this time, Motley Crue's album, "Shout at the Devil" was big, and Jason fell in love with that band. People would actually warn me that if I allowed him to listen to Motley Crue it would make him "crazy," but I ignored all of that gobbledygook, and learned to appreciate the Crue and other bands that my sons liked during that time, such as AC/DC.

Living on Myrtle Beach, my boys kept begging me to take them to the ocean, but my wife wouldn't allow it, because Jason was five and Chad was three. However, they kept asking me, so I waited until my wife went out one day, and then I got some little vests, arm floats, things to put over their noses, and goggles. I dressed them up, we went down to the ocean, I took their hands and asked, "Are you sure you boys want to do this?"

They couldn't have been more sure, so we started walking out really slowly, and would get hit by the waves and fall down. We would get up, keep walking out, and sometimes we would make it past the breakers. Then, I would let them go and the waves would take them back to shore. They were kicking their little feet having the greatest time. When my wife came back, she was very upset with me for taking the boys into the ocean. She didn't know that they had been wearing lots of protective devices, because by the time she got home - the only things left were the vests and the arm floats! After my wife calmed down, we had a little lunch and the boys took a nap. At about 5:00 p.m., Jason and Chad asked if they could go into the hotel pool. I told them they could, but that they had to put their floats on. They did as they were told, and we all jumped in the pool and started swimming. They were getting in and out of the pool – and as they kept jumping in, they would lose one arm float here and there, and before they knew it, the floats were completely off. Because of that, they had learned how to dog-paddle without even realizing it! That was a great day in my life - the day I taught my two little boys how to swim.

We would also visit Wilmington Beach in North Carolina, or head up to the Blue Ridge Parkway for a ride. It ran from Winchester, Virginia to Asheville, North Carolina, and at sundown, as we would drive around the mountain, it would get dark, but as we would come around the bend it would suddenly be daylight again. My boys would excitedly ask me how that just happened, and I would reply, "Because daddy's a magician!"

Living in the Carolinas afforded us opportunities to visit Chimney Rock, Maggie Valley, the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia, and the Smoky Mountains - which are one of the most beautiful, angelic places on earth - and I've been in a lot of places. If you've never been to the Carolinas, do yourself a favor and go. It is the most scenic and wonderful place that I ever lived in, and I can't say enough about the fabulous time I spent there. Jason was five and Chad was three, yet they still speak fondly of those memories.

My children were living very differently than I did during my childhood, because I never traveled more than six blocks from where I lived until I was a teenager. I understood that they were having a different upbringing, and I enjoyed that. I wanted them to experience life, to be able to see and do other things, realize that everywhere doesn't look like Texas, and understand that there are beaches and mountains out there. I wanted them to see all that, rather than just grow up in a microcosm like I did in a neighborhood of six blocks. Also, it was important to me for my sons to experience what my life was, with all the things that came with it – especially the travel and the enhancement of being able to experience different places. That's the one thing I gave my children that they appreciate more than anything else.

I was so happy and fortunate to have my family with me in the Carolinas. A lot of guys didn't take their families with them when they went to a new territory, and just left them at home. That's why there have been so many divorces and problems with children of wrestlers – because the husband and father was gone for nine months out of the year. I was different, and never felt it was an inconvenience to take my family on the road with me. I do recognize that not all wrestlers were privileged to have that opportunity – especially the underneath guys - but I was one of the fortunate ones, and I took advantage of it. In retrospect, the time I spent in the

Carolinas was the happiest time that I ever had, simply because I was having so much fun with my family every day.

After The Great Kabuki and I were there for a couple of months and pretty well indoctrinated in the territory, Jimmy Crockett called me and asked me to come to his office for a meeting. When I walked into his office, I saw Ernie Ladd and Wahoo McDaniel, who were both wrestling in the Carolinas at the time, and Dory Funk, who was the booker. Once we were all there, Jimmy started the meeting, and told us that he was going to be upgrading the way he did his TV's. The Mid-Atlantic territory used to bicycle a tape around The Carolinas. On the tape would be one TV show, and it would be mailed around and played on fifty television stations in seventeen different markets over a period of four months. Therefore, whatever angle was on that tape was new every time it played in a different city, and it automatically became the main event in that town. Therefore, the booker could use the same matches over and over in different towns for four months – because they were always new and fresh - and could tweak them as he went along. Also, he would only have to shoot three big angles a year, and just follow the tapes around.

Jimmy explained that he was bringing everything current, which would make it more difficult for one booker to take care of the territory on his own. Dory could no longer simply follow a tape around booking the same matches, and would need some help. Not only would he need creative ideas on how to develop and present programs - including two solid angles a week – but there was going to be a lot more attention to detail required to book the Carolinas effectively. By no means am I suggesting that Dory wasn't a capable booker. It's just that the Carolinas were so big that it was considered a "mega-territory." It was far bigger than Texas, because it operated in three states – North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia. Dory had one-hundred wrestlers on his roster, while other booking offices in Texas, Florida, and Georgia didn't have anything close to that. To boot, Dory had an arrangement with Baba to regularly tour Japan and supply him with talent, so Dory wore many hats during this time period, and was swamped.

Jimmy asked Wahoo, Ernie, and I if we would help Dory book the territory, and when we all agreed to, he shared his idea with us. Dory would still be the booker of the entire territory, but we would each be given a state, and would be responsible for the booking duties in our own respective states. He made it clear that these were not assistant booker jobs – we would be the actual booker for each state, and for our new responsibilities, Ernie, Wahoo, and I would be paid an additional \$500 a week and given health benefits. I was assigned to run North Carolina, Ernie would handle South Carolina, and Wahoo would be responsible for Virginia. Everything we did, of course, had to be approved by Dory. We were also each given a crew of wrestlers that we would book exclusively, and would only have to worry about booking them in our assigned state. Even though we were given a nucleus crew of guys who would draw us money on a nightly basis, they could be interchanged. For example, if Ernie wanted one of my guys for a night, and I wanted one of his guys – we could trade back and forth. This was nothing that the fans would have been aware of, and the states were not considered separate "brands," if you know what I mean.

The reason Jimmy had asked us to help Dory out was because we all had solid track records. I had proven myself as a booker in Florida, Georgia, and Texas, while Ernie had booked

successfully for Bill Watts' Mid-South Wrestling, and Wahoo had booked for Joe Blanchard's Southwest Championship Wrestling. Yes, not too long ago, Wahoo and I were bookers for competing promotions in the heat of a bitter war, but there were no hard feelings, and there was never any animosity between us, because it was never a personal issue, and we understood that.

Dory Funk, as well as Jimmy and David Crockett and the booking assistant, Gene Anderson, would meet with me, Ernie, and Wahoo twice a week - once to go over the live shows, and the other time to go over TV production. The seven of us would sit down at a big, round conference table and discuss our booking ideas for our respective states. I was always pretty well prepared - but Ernie and Wahoo weren't. They liked to just come in and throw out ideas during the roundtable discussion. I preferred having my ideas - and where I was going - all laid out in front of me. Therefore, I did most of my work at night when my family was sleeping, and I would bring those notes into the meetings. In spite of our different work styles, Ernie, Wahoo, and I got along just fine, and even though we were more or less left alone in regards to the programs that we wanted to do, we helped each other out as much as we could. For example, I was running a hot feud between Jimmy Valiant and The Great Kabuki, and every night The Great Kabuki would blow Jimmy green. During one of our meetings, Ernie suggested, "Gary, why don't you give Jimmy some protection from the green mist to add a little excitement?"

That was a great idea, so I got together with Jimmy Valiant, and we talked about what kind of protection he could use. Jimmy then went out and got a pair of goggles - but they were big ones, like a sea-diver would wear. Then, during his interviews, he dared The Great Kabuki to blow him green, and pulled out his "protection." That really drew great - and we were able to prolong The Great Kabuki-Jimmy Valiant feud. Without Ernie's suggestion, it would have done okay - but I'm sure they wouldn't have had the run they had. Then, there was an angle that Wahoo was booking in which he and Mark Youngblood were involved in a feud with The Assassins. The Assassins manager, Paul Jones, would constantly hit Wahoo and Mark with his cane, so a series of matches were booked where Wahoo would wrestle Paul. Their feud didn't draw as well as Wahoo would have thought, so I went to one of his shows to see if I could help out. During their match, I noticed that the fans kept looking to the back, seemingly waiting for The Assassins to run in and save their manager. I picked up on that, and talked Wahoo into re-booking their match - but this time I suggested he make it a lumberjack match, and give all the lumberjacks canes. That way, all the babyfaces who had been hit by Paul Jones would be there to "exact revenge."

Those are just two examples of how we worked together and tweaked each others angles for the betterment of the entire territory. Ernie suggested something great for my state, and I helped Wahoo out in his. All three of us worked really well together - and Dory and Jimmy were wonderful to report to. It was a good working relationship, and I must say it all went very smoothly.

On top of booking the entire territory, Dory was also wrestling throughout the Carolinas, and he asked me if I would serve as his manager. Needless to say, I was more than happy to manage him - and jumped at the chance. This was during a time when Dory was clearly wrestling under a mask - and we went out to the ring and acted as if nobody knew it was him! I also managed Ernie Ladd - referring to him as my "bounty hunter" - so for awhile there not only

was I booking North Carolina, but I was also managing the booker of South Carolina as well as the head booker for the entire Mid-Atlantic area! To say I was kept busy would be an understatement.

I must say that I had a pretty decent crew to work with in North Carolina, with guys like Jake Roberts, Mike Rotundo, Baron Von Raschke, Ronnie Garvin, and Angelo Mosca. Sgt. Slaughter was also there, and he was big-time over and very gracious to me. Slaughter is a great guy and a quality man in every way, and I have nothing but respect for him. Another guy on my crew was Sir Oliver Humperdink, and it occurred to me that together, we could resurrect H&H, Ltd., but this time it would be named after Humperdink & Hart. Together, we shared a terrific stable of wrestlers, including The Great Kabuki, The One Man Gang, and Jos LeDuc. Sir Oliver lived down the road from me during that time, and I spent a lot of time visiting with him and relaxing in his hot tub, just having a great time with my buddy.

In July of 1983, we staged a big show at Exhibition Stadium in Toronto. A lot of wrestlers forget about Canada – but Canada was a great place to work, and I love that country. We did tapings out of Ottawa and Hamilton, so I spent quite a bit of time in Canada during my Mid-Atlantic run. When it came to international bookings, Dory was the man in charge, and he is the one who booked that big show at Exhibition Stadium in which The Great Kabuki faced Jimmy Valiant. I was then booked on the return, teaming with The Great Kabuki against Jimmy Valiant and Bob Orton in a cage match.

Because of my position in the office, I was privy to a lot of behind-the-scenes deals and maneuverings. At one point, Jimmy Crockett wanted to bring Bruiser Brody and Stan Hansen into the Mid-Atlantic territory in order to win the NWA World Tag Team Title. I was asked to broker the deal, not because I was booking North Carolina, but because of my longtime connection with Brody. It was felt that I could have some influence on bringing him in, because we had worked so long together in Texas. I spoke to Brody about coming into the Carolinas, and when he asked me my opinion, I told him that Jimmy Crockett and the Carolinas were great, and then added, “In all honesty, I don’t think that this will be a situation where you and Stan can just take dates here in between your tours of Japan, like you did with me in Texas. Jimmy wants to put the belts on you.”

Brody was intrigued, so he and Stan flew into Charlotte to have a meeting with Jimmy, Dory, and me. We all talked about it and tried to work out a deal, but because of their commitments in Japan, it just wasn’t possible. The Carolinas was such a big territory that for them to work for us just six months out of the year would not have worked. The odd thing about this was that Dory was their booker in Japan. He was the booker of both Mid-Atlantic and All Japan at the time, and was basically trying to recruit talent from one of his groups to another!

Being the booker for North Carolina also gave me the opportunity to bring the Von Erich boys into the Carolinas. All three of them made several trips to North Carolina during my run, and they were constantly asking me to go to the ring and manage them. Of course, I never did, because word would have gotten back to Texas via the wrestling dirtsheets, but it would have been great to manage the Von Erich boys as heels in North Carolina.

## Chapter 35: Starrcade

During the summer of 1983, Dory, Ernie, Wahoo, and I started our build for the first ever Starrcade, to be held at the Greensboro Coliseum on Thanksgiving night of 1983. The name came from Dusty Rhodes – who was booking Florida at the time - but the concept was all Jimmy Crockett's.

Officially, I was the booker in charge for the first Starrcade, not only because I was responsible for North Carolina, but because Dory Funk wasn't going to be there that night. He would be in Japan for the annual All Japan Tag Team Tournament teaming with Giant Baba. I had a lot of experience in booking and building to big shows - like Wrestling Star Wars - and since Ric Flair had come in for those cards he apparently went back to the Carolinas and told Jimmy Crockett about the great job I was doing in Texas. That's why Jimmy made me responsible for North Carolina, because he knew that Starrcade would be there, and he wanted me to oversee it. At that time I was a very successful guy in the business, and my track record made that obvious. Even though I was very low-key about it, and didn't trumpet my successes all that much, the people that would know, knew, and Jimmy Crockett and Dory Funk definitely knew I could build to and layer a big show. I was always very good at that: Seeing where I'm going, figuring out how to get there, and most importantly, delivering the goods.

Another reason Jimmy wanted me to book for him leading up to Starrcade was because I had a lot of good talent connections. Certain promoters – such as Sam Muchnick, Eddie Graham and Vince McMahon - had good connections, but most promoters just stayed in one place, and that's why they needed bookers. A booker's number one responsibility was – above all else – to supply quality talent to an area. I was fortunate to have a lot of connections, because throughout my career, I was always out and about, and I saw talent from Australia, Florida, Georgia, and Texas. Of course, I was also very fortunate in that I booked some fantastic territories. Had I been a booker in Los Angeles, Portland, Vancouver, Kansas City, or Tennessee – I wouldn't have gotten to know a lot of good wrestlers. Therefore, a good booker had to be very selective of not only the talent he hired – but also of the jobs he took. The Sheik asked me several times to book for him in Detroit, and Don Owen talked to me many times about coming into Portland, as well, but I never gave it any thought.

Given the facts that I was currently booking in a great territory and I had built up a solid crew of guys I regularly used over the years, I ended up bringing a lot of “my guys” in for Starrcade. If you look at the lineup, you'll realize just how much input I had on Starrcade simply based on how many of my guys were there, because I used to have a saying: “You're figured in.”

When I told someone that, it meant that for every big show that I produced, they would be in a prominent spot to make a good payoff. And sure enough, for Starrcade, I made sure that Mark Lewin, Dick Slater, Bob Orton, The Great Kabuki, and Abdullah the Butcher – “my boys” - were all figured in.

We loaded the card from top to bottom, and that really made the difference. Yes, Starrcade was promoted really well, but it had a lot to do with the talent that was there. You can

never build a strong fortress out of weak material. You have to have strong personalities and great in ring performers, and I was very fortunate to be blessed with an abundance of both. Starrcade was also unique because every match had meaning, and had been programmed for that very show. There wasn't one "excuse me" match on the card, it was all balls-to-the-wall action, and the crowd was into every single match that night. There was a lot of meat there, and that was a big part of its success.

Starrcade even had its own special music— by Frank Stallone, believe it or not – which in itself made the show seem like an event. Also, we broadcasted the show live via closed circuit not only throughout the Carolinas, but in other places like Georgia, Puerto Rico, Venezuela, and the Virgin Islands, to name just a few. That was extremely groundbreaking and risky, because even though wrestling promoters had utilized closed circuit in the past, never before had they attempted doing it outside of their own territory.

On Thanksgiving night, people came from all throughout the Carolinas for the show, and many people traveled great distances hoping to buy a ticket at the last minute. Unfortunately for them, the building was packed, and there were helicopters flying over announcing to the overflow crowd, "This event is sold out!"

I'm very proud of the first Starrcade, and because it is so historical and still talked about and celebrated to this day, I'll briefly go through each match one by one:

### **Mark Lewin and Kevin Sullivan vs. Johnny Weaver and Scott McGhee**

Mark and Kevin were in Florida at the time, but I brought them up for Starrcade. Mark and I will always have a very strong bond, and I was thrilled to get him booked on the show. At the time, Kevin was doing a devil worshipping gimmick in Florida, and Mark was his sidekick, billing himself as the drugged-out Purple Haze. Kevin's gimmick was really based on something that rocker Alice Cooper had done in the 70's, but Kevin was always bizarre. If he could have held a doll in his arms on TV and said it was a baby, he would have cut its head off just to get heat. That was Kevin's way of presenting himself, and while it fit Kevin, I didn't like it when Mark presented himself in a drug-induced light, and preferred when he was "Maniac" Mark Lewin. Mark's "Maniac" persona was based on the premise that in the late 60's, he was a mercenary soldier in south east Asia, and on one of his missions he was left behind. In order to survive, he had to eat frogs and lick the dew off of lily-pads. I didn't manage them that night, because I felt uncomfortable presenting myself in an alliance with a devil worshipper and a drugged out weirdo. I always tried to maintain some class with the way I conducted myself and the people I presented. Then again, I presented Abdullah the Butcher...

### **Bugsy McGraw and Rufus R. Jones vs. The Assassins**

I had used Bugsy prominently in Texas and really helped him develop his character - much to Fritz's chagrin - and always enjoyed working with him. Paul Jones managed The Assassins, who were Jody Hamilton and Hercules Hernandez - before he went to the WWF and got his big break.



### **The Great Kabuki vs. Jimmy Valiant**

I love Jimmy. He's a Chicago boy, and I had known him for years before our run in the Carolinas. He was a fabulous entertainer, and when he would hit the ring, the crowd would go crazy. That night, his match with The Great Kabuki was pandemonium from beginning to end.

### **Dick Slater and Bob Orton vs. Wahoo McDaniel and Mark Youngblood**

I had to bring my boys Dick and Bob in. I had originally put them together and been their manager in 1975, so it was only fitting I got them booked on Starrcade. I understand there is a rumor that Hulk Hogan was originally scheduled to be Wahoo's partner for this match, but I can tell you without a doubt that Hulk Hogan was never scheduled for Starrcade. I don't care what Bill Apter promoted in his magazine, or if Hogan's picture was in the program that night – along with other wrestlers who didn't appear on the show, by the way - it was never on the books. Believe me – I would know.

### **Abdullah the Butcher vs. Carlos Colon**

We took a match that was traditionally seen in the Caribbean, and put it in - of all places - Greensboro, North Carolina. That made Carlos look like a superstar in Puerto Rico - because he was on the biggest North American show of the year with his most hated opponent, and it showed that the match was important outside of the Caribbean, and was valued worldwide. It helped Carlos a great deal, but at the same time, it brought his promotion, the World Wrestling Council, to Starrcade, so it made Starrcade seem bigger, as well. It was win-win for everyone.

### **Greg Valentine vs. Roddy Piper**

Greg, the son of my good friend Johnny Valentine, was involved in a real hot feud with my buddy from Georgia, Roddy Piper. That was a long time build, and their dog-collar match was so brutal that Roddy lost some hearing that night, but it was accidental. They were actually best of friends, and went out after the match and partied together. Both Greg and Roddy left shortly after Starrcade to work for the WWF.

### **Jack and Jerry Brisco vs. Ricky Steamboat and Jay Youngblood**

The Briscos were excellent heels. They did very little cheating, and they wouldn't do anything illegal behind the referees back, but they would take every legal advantage that they could take - which made them the aggressors. Jack was a legendary figure by that time, and Jerry was quite good on the microphone. He had always been a babyface, but when he got to be a heel, he used everything he ever heard any heel say.

### **Ric Flair vs. Harley Race**

No one was happier than I was when Ric won the belt that night - and Harley was ready to drop it. In those days, the champion had to regularly go to Tennessee, Alabama, Kentucky, Los Angeles, Portland, Japan, St. Louis, Oklahoma, the Carolinas, Texas, Florida, and Georgia –

among many other territories. He had to go out every night and give his best performance for forty-five minutes to an hour, because that's what the promoters wanted. In some areas they went to there were great competitors and contenders, and in some areas there was sub-par talent who couldn't put their jock straps on with directions. It's a very difficult schedule, so any time a champ dropped the belt, he was ready. Former NWA Champion Gene Kiniski was the referee for this match, by the way.

Starrcade was a huge success, and it showed in the payoffs. The Great Kabuki and I got \$10,000 each. When Jimmy Crockett handed me the \$20,000, he asked in his own little way, "Is this okay?"

I assured him that it was more than okay. Jimmy Crockett was very generous to all involved that night, and even paid the guys who took the tape of Ric winning the title to all of his TV stations \$500 apiece!

Little did I know at the time that Starrcade wouldn't be the only show I had a hand in booking that night. Fritz Von Erich promoted a big Thanksgiving night show of his own at the Reunion Arena in Dallas, and, believe it or not, actually re-used one of my finishes! He booked Kerry Von Erich vs. Michael Hayes in a steel cage, and personally slammed the cage door on Michael's head for some "payback time." I guess Fritz didn't want me to be his booker – but he sure wanted my finishes!

Not only did Starrcade have a tremendous impact on the fans, but on the wrestling business, as well. Everyone in the industry sat up and took notice of what we were doing in Charlotte that night. No matter what anyone says about other wrestling supercards – Starrcade truly is "The Granddaddy of them all."

In many ways, that's why Starrcade lasted as an annual event until the year 2000 – because it was more than just a big show. In years to come, people would start buying tickets for Starrcade without even knowing the card, because they knew it was going to be a big spectacular, and that it was the cream of the crop. Starrcade was a great achievement for me. I'm proud to have had a hand in booking the first one, and it's a testament to its success that Starrcade became an annual event for years to come.

## Chapter 36: Jason

After booking Starrcade and making \$10,000 in one night, I was on the top of the world. Unfortunately, that feeling of invincibility was about to come crashing down on me.

One Saturday morning after the holidays, my sons were out playing in the yard, when Jason climbed a tree. He climbed up twenty-five feet high before falling off onto the cement below. Chad came running to the house screaming that Jason had fallen out of a tree, and since I was upstairs sleeping, my wife went running out to get him. She brought Jason back in her arms, and that's when I woke up – to the vision of my child with his eyes rolled back in his head, barely breathing, and a lump on the side of his head the size of a tennis ball.

For the first time in my whole life, I felt totally helpless, because there was nothing I could do to help my own son. My wife and I immediately stashed Chad next door with a friend, jumped in our car, and went speeding through the streets of Charlotte headed towards the hospital. The whole time I was praying to God that a cop would stop me and give us a police escort - but there wasn't one in sight. Throughout the trip, I kept talking to Jason, trying to keep him awake, and doing all I could to keep myself from becoming a vegetable until we got him to the hospital. Believe it or not, the first hospital we arrived at told us we had to go to a children's hospital, and I nearly went out of my mind. However, I held it together and eventually got Jason to a children's hospital, and when they took him away on a stretcher, I became a total mess.

After a long while, the doctors came out and said he had three linear fractures in his skull, and they were draining fluid off the side of his head because it was swollen so massively. He was in stable condition, but they wanted to keep him in the hospital for more observations and tests, and they said it would take a while before they knew the full extent of his injuries. They asked if we wanted to go in and see him, and I told my wife that I just couldn't handle it. She understood, and stayed with him that night.

I put on the bravest face I could when I went home to see Chad, and did everything in my power to maintain that. As messed up as I was, I knew that I had to be strong for him. Then, I called Jimmy Crockett, told him what happened, and explained that I was in no shape to go to the shows. He was wonderful, and said, "Don't worry, Gary. Family comes first. You do what you have to do, and if you need anything, just give me a call."

If it was anyone other than Jimmy Crockett, they would have let me go. However, Jimmy actually kept me on as the booker of North Carolina, and made it clear that I should do whatever booking I could from home. It was important, though, that I be at the studio on Wednesdays for the TV tapings, because I helped Gene Anderson run the interviews.

During the next couple of days, I got calls from Dory Funk and his wife, Jack and Jerry Brisco, Fritz and Doris Von Erich, Greg Valentine, Oliver Humperdink, Mark Lewin, and Kevin Sullivan. They had all heard what happened and called to offer their support and kind words. They were all wonderful and upbeat, assuring me that everything would turn out alright, and if they hadn't kept calling, I don't know how I would have gotten through that time.

I booked the cards from my house, but I really didn't spend a lot of time thinking about wrestling. The only thing I could think about was if Jason was going to get better. I really became depressed, and was actually in mild shock for quite a while. I even gave up smoking pot for a long time. That alone should tell you what a tremendous affect it had on me. My head was really messed up over that for a long time. Up to that point, I was invincible. If something was troubling my boys, dad could fix it. This was different, and I was helpless. It was an extremely difficult time for me, but I'm happy to say that Jason came out of it perfectly, and there were no lasting effects from the fall. Jason remembers the whole thing, but we don't really talk about it. Thank God Chad was only three, because he doesn't really remember it.

That was the hardest thing I ever had to deal with in my life. The plane crash was nothing. It was a hellacious experience, but in retrospect, it offered me a release. I had been carrying the horror of the plane crash with me until Jason fell out of the tree, and it was only then that I finally let the crash go for good. \_

## Chapter 37: David Von Erich

One day in February, our phone rang at about 9:00 a.m. My wife answered the phone, and when she woke me up and told me I had to take the call - I knew it couldn't be good. I picked up the phone, and it was Bill Apter. "Did you hear the news?" He asked. "David Von Erich was found dead in Japan."

Hearing those words was like somebody hitting me in the heart with a hammer. I literally went into a daze. I was so devastated that I just could not bring myself to call Fritz and Doris with my condolences, so I asked my wife to do it. It was just too much for me to handle. She called them, and even though Fritz was not one of my favorite people, I was able to get on the phone with him and offer my condolences. It was a horrendous time.

A few days later, Jimmy Crockett called me and said, "Ric and I and my two brothers are flying to Dallas for the funeral. We saved a seat on the Lear jet for you."

I thanked Jimmy, but told him that I was too devastated, and that it would be too hard for me to go to David's funeral. I just couldn't go.

Sometime later, Bronko Lubitch called and asked if The Great Kabuki and I would make a special appearance at the David Von Erich Memorial card on May 6<sup>th</sup> in Texas Stadium. I told him that I had to get Jimmy Crockett's approval before I committed, because I was working for him. Jimmy gave me his blessings, though, because he was also sending Ric Flair in to work on the card.

There were 44,000 people at Texas Stadium that day - all of them affected by David's death. Even though it was the biggest house in the history of the Dallas booking office, I was not in a festive or jovial mood that day. To me, it was all sad. I felt the concept of a Memorial card was a nice gesture, but I was uncomfortable with certain things. I noticed that Fritz had doubled the ticket prices, and raised the prices of David's pictures that day. It almost seemed as if he was taking advantage of David's death for financial gain, although I knew how much he loved David.

I tried to avoid being around Fritz as much as possible while in the dressing room. I don't know if I was still angry at him for the awful way things ended between us, or if I just couldn't look at him knowing his son was dead. We did say hello, but it wasn't like it used to be. It was totally different, and I was probably standoffish - but more out of not wanting to get into a conversation and emotionally involved with David's death. At one point Fritz asked me, "What do you think of Kerry getting the World Title today?"

I actually didn't even know Kerry was scheduled to win it from Ric that night, and asked how long he would have the belt for.

"Eighteen days." Fritz replied.

"That's the worst thing you can do to him." I said.

Fritz got upset with me for saying that, and snapped, “You’ll never change, will you?”

That was my honest opinion, though. I didn’t see the point, after all these years, for Kerry to finally win the title at David’s Memorial, and then go to Japan and lose it a couple of weeks later. I thought an hour Broadway between the two of them would have been just fine, but that’s me.

People have said that David Von Erich could have been world champion had he lived – but that can only be speculated upon, because he was never “promised” anything. I have even heard stories about how David was “scheduled” to win it from Ric Flair in 1983, but that Harley Race “took” the belt instead, leaving David out in the cold. That story is utterly ridiculous. No one was ever “promised” the NWA Title, and Harley didn’t sabotage anything. Harley’s big ambition was to become World Champion more times than Lou Thesz. Lou had it three times, so Harley won it eight times. Of course, then Ric’s main goal in life was to have it more than Harley – so Ric won the NWA Title ten times! However, by doing that, it made them less of a champion than Lou Thesz was – not more.

I brought my family to the Memorial show, because we were going to spend that week in Dallas visiting relatives. That led to the one good thing that happened to me that day - I got to see my boy Gino Hernandez again. He had finally jumped ship from Joe Blanchard’s promotion and returned to the Texas booking office, and Jason and Chad found him and brought him over to me, screaming, “Hey dad! Look who we found!”

The Great Kabuki was scheduled to face Kamala, managed by General Skandor Akbar. As The Great Kabuki and I came out of the tunnel at Texas Stadium, the fans started jumping, cheering, and carrying on. They were so overwrought with emotion for losing David, that seeing me and The Great Kabuki – because we had been gone for so long - must have touched something nostalgic in them for the good ol’ days gone by, and they gave us the heroes welcome. It was obvious that The Great Kabuki and I were going to be the fan favorites that day, so as I was taking The Great Kabuki’s outfit off, I whispered, “Don’t fight it. Just lay back and let Kamala be the heel. The people want us to be good guys today.”

Not only were The Great Kabuki and I booked for the Memorial show, but we were also promised a win on World Class Championship Wrestling, as well. When The Great Kabuki and I showed up at the Sportatorium on Friday, I was greeted by the man who replaced me as booker for Texas: Ken Mantell.

Ken Mantell was a mediocre wrestler who had a short career in Los Angeles and Oklahoma, and his claim to fame was that he once held the Junior Heavyweight Title. He mostly had an un-illustrious in-ring career, though, and I would know - because I had used him when I had the book in Georgia. During that time, he told me that he had always wanted to get into promoting, so that’s what Fritz and I hired him for in the first place - to promote some spot shows in Texas. He and Fritz became good friends, and during the early 80’s Ken would often go to Fritz’s house and socialize with him. Ken was simply in the right place at the right time,

though, because – without any formal training or serving as an assistant - Fritz made him his booker when I left Texas in 1983.

After a cordial greeting, Ken gave me his idea for The Great Kabuki's match that night by saying, "It's going to be The Fabulous Freebirds against Kamala, The Missing Link, and The Great Kabuki, and The Great Kabuki will lose the fall."

"Kamala and The Great Kabuki just wrestled each other at David's Memorial," I reminded him. "Now you want them to be tag team partners? On top of that, we were promised a win tonight, and now you're telling me that you want The Great Kabuki to drop the fall? No, Ken, this doesn't make any sense whatsoever."

Ken insisted that this was the match he wanted, so I reiterated my stance by saying, "Skandor Akbar and I were just in a big fist fight at Texas Stadium, and now we're supposed to stand in the corner together and watch my guy get beat? There is no way this will happen."

"Well, you guys are from the Carolinas," Ken argued. "So it doesn't really matter if The Great Kabuki gets pinned."

"World Class Championship Wrestling plays in the Carolinas," I pointed out. "So I'm nicely telling you no - we won't do it."

"What if Killer Khan runs in and attacks The Great Kabuki so Michael Hayes can cover him?"

At that point I got in Ken's face and said, "What part of 'No' don't you understand? We're not doing it."

Now, I don't want you to think I was acting like a big shot who refused to do jobs, or that I acted out of arrogance or anger, and that it was just sour grapes on my part. It's actually quite the contrary. When The Great Kabuki and I went to Texas for the week, we were with Mid-Atlantic Championship Wrestling - so Jimmy Crockett was loaning us out for those shows. We went with his graces, and he had my assurance that we would do the right thing for business. Jimmy Crockett had time and money invested in us in the Carolinas, and for us to go to Texas and diminish The Great Kabuki on World Class Championship Wrestling – which played in major markets throughout the Carolinas - would have been bad for Jimmy Crockett's business.

A few minutes after I let Ken know where we stood, The Great Kabuki pulled me aside and said, "Gary-son. Maybe it makes no difference if I lose. This way, everybody happy, and better for business."

I just looked at him and said, "I'm going into the dressing room to take off this three piece suit I have on, get into my khakis and T-shirt, and then I'm going back to the hotel. Are you coming with me?"

The Great Kabuki looked down at the ground and said, “I think maybe I should stay. That way Fritz won’t get mad.”

“Kabuki, if I leave this building without you, it will never be the same between us again.”

“Gary-son, just this one time I stay.”

I left the Sportatorium without The Great Kabuki that day, and he did the job on World Class Championship Wrestling – all because he didn’t want “heat” with Fritz, since he was afraid that he would say “bad things” about him to Baba. Early on in my career, I learned that if you take care of your gimmick, your gimmick will take care of you. I always had The Great Kabuki’s best interest at heart, but after that experience with him, my whole attitude about protecting and taking care of what he and I built went out the window. If he didn’t want to take care of his gimmick, then why should I?

Takachiho had been wrestling for fifteen years as an underneath guy and a put-over guy before I chose him for The Great Kabuki. Where was Fritz when he was starving in Kansas City? Did Fritz send him money and offer him a job? No. I did. I invested \$5,000 of my own money for all his outfits, and helped him become a giant star in wrestling. He was one of the hottest wrestlers that the 80’s had, and he made hundreds of thousands of dollars thanks to me - including \$10,000 in one night for Starrcade! I bought him his stuff, I gave him his gimmick, and I made him a major attraction in wrestling, and this was how he repaid me.

After all the success we had achieved, that was the way The Great Kabuki and I ended our run. I cut him loose, and that was it for us. We had planned to go back to North Carolina and finish our program with Jimmy Valiant, in which Jimmy would beat The Great Kabuki in the Greensboro Coliseum and I would get my head shaved. However, I told Jimmy Crockett that I didn’t want to do it anymore, because The Great Kabuki and I were through. Jimmy understood, and in time – surprise, surprise - The Great Kabuki went to Japan and became a gigantic star for Baba.



## Chapter 38: Meanwhile, Back On The East Coast

In April of 1984, Jack and Jerry Brisco sold their shares in Georgia Championship Wrestling to Vince McMahon. Even though nobody saw that sale coming, I was well aware of their unhappiness with the way the Georgia territory was going, and of the problems they were having with their co-owner and booker, Ole Anderson. Some time back, Jack and Jerry asked me if I would be comfortable replacing Ole as booker in Georgia should the situation arise, and I said I would, but added that I would have to clear it with Jimmy Crockett first. I went to talk with Jimmy, and told him that there was a possibility that the Brisco's would ask Ole to step down as booker, and if they did, they had offered me his job, and I was interested in taking it. I added, "If you would keep it to yourself I would really appreciate it."

That week, Ole was in town for a big show at the Charlotte Coliseum, and Jimmy called me into a back room. I walked in and saw Ole Anderson standing there. "What's this I hear about you coming to take my booking job?" He barked.

"I'm not coming to take your job," I told him. "If someone loses their position it's no longer their job, and if the Brisco's ask you to resign as the booker, I would be interested in that particular job once again."

Ole just stood there and looked at me.

I reasoned, "Ole, what would you expect? If Jimmy offered you the job to be the booker here, would you or would you not take it? Would you mind taking the job if Dory, Wahoo, Ernie, and I were being let go?"

Ole shrugged his shoulders and said, "Well, I guess not."

I've known Ole since 1971, and he doesn't have the greatest personality in the world. In the ring, he was a bully who could shoot a little bit, and if you didn't know how to wrestle, he would make you look like a fool. If you had guts, though, he wouldn't mess with you. As a booker, Ole was harsh on talent, much like Bill Watts. He was very blunt and would tell you exactly what he thought. Ole did a tremendous job as a booker for Jim Barnett, even though they never really gelled together. Jim respected Ole's work ethic, but Ole is a very outspoken guy, and Ole just looked at Jim as "some gay guy." While I do have a lot of respect for Ole, Ole Anderson on his best day was never as sharp as Jim Barnett on his worst day.

Once the deal was made between the Brisco's and Vince McMahon, any talk of me replacing Ole as booker ended, and – more importantly – Vince got Georgia Championship Wrestling's timeslot on TBS. That was a tremendous deal for the WWF, because TBS was the flagship station for the National Wrestling Alliance. Vince already had The USA Network locked up, but in 1984 that was considered a small, growing network. TBS, however, was the

almighty powerhouse station that was well-known for airing two hours of wrestling every Saturday night.

As soon as that deal went down, the NWA promoters went into panic mode, and began discussing ways to pool their talent together in order to “fight back.” The biggest advantage Vince had there was that he was a committee of one making the decisions as to what was best for the WWF, while the NWA promoters were a committee of many worried about themselves and their individual promotions, rather than the NWA as a whole. Jimmy Crockett, in particular, wanted to fight the WWF head-on in their own turf, rather than wait for Vince to come to the Carolinas, so he booked a show at the Meadowlands in New Jersey. Keep in mind that at the time, the WWF was not running shows in the Carolinas, so he was basically acting out of anger, frustration, and fear, and there was no solid reason he had to book that show in New Jersey.

Even though it was presented as a joint promotion with what was left of the Georgia office, it was really a Jimmy Crockett show, because Ole Anderson didn’t have any money. Jimmy asked me to appear on the card, which was dubbed, “A Night of Champions,” and since everyone had to get medical clearance and have the proper New Jersey license to appear on the show, Jimmy sent me to this doctor in downtown Charlotte. As I was sitting in the waiting room before my appointment with the doctor, he walked out of his office and looked as if he had been sent by Central Casting for a horror flick. He was so frightening looking that there was no way I was going to let him “examine” me, so I stood up and left. I went to Jimmy’s office and told him, “There is no way I will use that doctor to get cleared for New Jersey. I wouldn’t even let him examine my dog!”

I tried scheduling an appointment with another doctor, but getting cleared to appear on a wrestling card in New Jersey was very hard, and not something that could quickly get done, so I just couldn’t get my clearance in time, and ended up not appearing on the show.

During this time, Jim Barnett had gone to work for the WWF. One day, Jim called and asked me to have The Fabulous Freebirds call him, because Vince McMahon was interested in signing them. This was during the whole Cyndi Lauper Rock ‘N’ Wrestling Connection deal. I called Michael Hayes up, told him that Jim Barnett wanted to talk with him, and passed on Jim’s phone number. Soon after, Jim Barnett called again, asking if I can help them secure Kamala, who by that time was on my crew in North Carolina. I told Jim I would, and I followed through on that, as well. So in the summer of 1984, I actually served as the conduit in getting The Fabulous Freebirds and Kamala into the WWF!

Now, before you get any funny ideas about how I was “sabotaging” the NWA from the inside – let’s think about this logically. If I didn’t pass along Jim’s message, do you really think that the WWF wouldn’t have pursued The Fabulous Freebirds and Kamala any further? Yes, as a booker for the NWA I felt a little guilty about helping the opposition secure great talent, but at the same time, I was doing a favor for Jim, and simply passing along a message to Michael Hayes, Terry Gordy, Buddy Roberts, and Kamala. And if I didn’t – someone else would have. Plus, my mindset was that Vince McMahon couldn’t hire every wrestler out there. I knew that whenever he would bring in one of “ours” – someone from the NWA - he would have to get rid of one of “his,” otherwise he would inflate his crew and implode. As just one example, during

this time, everyone was making a big deal over the fact that Vince “took” Hulk Hogan from Verne Gagne’s AWA - but within a year of that acquisition, Vince let Sgt. Slaughter go – who was over tremendously as a babyface - and he ended up in the AWA! That was a big coup for the AWA, because Sgt. Slaughter was a big star. So it was only logical to me that if Vince were to get one of ours – we would eventually get one of his, because he had to let a guy go and be “out there.” That was the way I played the game and that was how I conducted my business.

Tully Blanchard had just come into the Mid-Atlantic territory, and one night we were in Raleigh. He was listening to me discuss a match with my guys, and he butted in, “Why don’t you do what’s best for the town rather than what’s best for you?”

I shot back, “It’s best you keep your mouth shut. If you have anything to say about the way I’m running this town, go tell Jimmy Crockett about it. I don’t want any of your games in my dressing room.”

Tully was a difficult guy to do anything with, and was a trouble maker. He was the type to come into a territory and on his first day presume he knew how to run the promotion better than anyone else. I’m sure that he had hard feelings over the war that I had with his father in Texas, and didn’t like the fact that I was now his boss. However, his insinuation that I was using my position as booker to take care of me and mine was completely baseless, and something I never did. A lot of bookers would go into a territory, book themselves on top every night, pay themselves really good, and screw everyone else around. Then, when the boys would complain, the booker would blame the promoter for being cheap. I knew better than that, because the worst thing a booker can do is feature themselves, because it just makes the rest of the talent mad. Then, the boys have all the ammunition they need when they go to the office and complain the booker isn’t giving anyone else a chance because they’re hogging the main events for themselves. I must admit, though, that I would take advantage of my position and book myself along the Carolina coast so that I could take my family with me and we could enjoy the beaches. They were smaller towns and I made less money – but I really didn’t care.

During 1984, I managed Bob Orton and Don Kernodle, who were the NWA World Tag Team champions. As I mentioned earlier, even though a lot of NWA territories had World Tag Team Titles, they were really just regional belts. The World Tag Team Title in the Carolinas, however, were unofficially considered the “legitimate” World Tag Team Title for the NWA, because the Mid-Atlantic territory was – geographically - the largest NWA sanctioned territory, and consisted of many states.

I was also reunited with my old friend Ivan Koloff, and started managing him again. At the time, he was breaking in his “nephew” Nikita, and I became his manager, as well. However, I wasn’t acting like the Gary Hart of old. Even though I was presented with a great, young piece of talent like Nikita Koloff, I didn’t take the reins and help develop his career like I had in the past with young wrestlers like Gino Hernandez and the Von Erich’s. Instead, I more or less just showed up and stood by his side. That was extremely unusual for me, because there was nothing I loved more than developing fresh, new talent. Jimmy Crockett probably figured I would have jumped at the opportunity to help mold Nikita’s career and relish every second of it – but I didn’t. In retrospect, I was emotionally exhausted, and had been through a very traumatic few

months. First, Jason fell out of the tree, then one of my favorite people - David Von Erich - died, and finally, I went through my breakup with The Great Kabuki. 1984 was not shaping up to be a good year for me.

My wife and Doris Von Erich were always very close, and they would call each other occasionally. One day, my wife was talking with Doris and she handed me the phone saying, "Fritz is on the line. He wants to talk to you."

I got on the phone with him, and he asked how the family was and how I was doing in North Carolina working for Jimmy Crockett. Fritz looked at Jimmy as a know-nothing drunk who inherited his fathers business. He had no respect for him at all, and it really annoyed him that when I left Texas I went to work for him.

Fritz then told me, "I'm thinking of turning one of my most popular babyfaces – Chris Adams - heel, but in order for it to be done right, I need you involved. Would you ever consider returning to Texas to help me out with this?"

Now I'm sure you're wondering why, after the way things ended between us, I would even consider going back to work for him. The simple answer is because my wife was a Texan and my children were Texans - and it was time to go home. Plus, with the emotional year I had, I really needed a rest, and a place where I didn't have very much responsibility, because I was really getting tired of being a booker. It was 1984 and I had been booking nonstop for ten years - since 1974 in Florida under Bill Watts.

When I was booking Texas, I would get phone calls from different promoters asking if Mark Lewin was interested in booking their territory. Whenever I would pass their message on to Mark, he would say that he didn't want to be a booker anymore, and that he just wanted to "hang out." At the time, I couldn't understand his mindset, but by 1984 - I completely understood. By 1984, my life and my priorities had gotten to the point where booking took up too much of my time, and it limited me from doing the things that I really wanted to do – like spend time with my family.

I accepted Fritz's offer and went to Jimmy Crockett to give my notice. He thanked me for my time in North Carolina, and surprised me by telling me that Dusty Rhodes was coming in as the new booker. Dusty was booking Florida at the time, but was looking to step up. As I detailed earlier, Eddie wasn't really friendly with the cash, and Jimmy Crockett dropped a bundle for Dusty to come in. Everyone in the Carolinas was very happy that Dusty was coming in, because his track record in Florida was phenomenal. Even Dory Funk was happy, because he was effectively trading places with Dusty – and was going to be the new booker in Florida!

As tough as that year had been, my time spent working for Jimmy Crockett was wonderful. He has a great heart and was an honest and true friend.

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## Chapter 39: My Return to Texas

After moving back to Texas in August, 1984, my wife and I enrolled both of our sons in school - Jason in the first grade and Chad in kindergarten. I then got a call from David Manning, who was booker Ken Mantell's assistant, saying that he wanted me to come into the office and meet Chris Adams. When I got to the office, it was just David, Chris, and I.

Chris and I started talking, and although I knew he was an excellent wrestler and performer, I also learned he was a judo champion, and that his brother was the judo coach for the British Olympic team. After getting to know each other better, I told Chris that I had left Texas under extremely bad circumstances just under two years ago, and then when I came back for the Texas Stadium show, I had flat-out refused what Ken Mantell wanted me to do. I even warned Chris, "If we team up, I might have some heat with people that won't give you a fair opportunity."

David quickly assured us that wasn't the case, and Chris was confident enough in our abilities to want to give it a try. Then, I told Chris the same thing I told every guy I ever teamed up with. "When the day comes that you're no longer happy with me, please let me be the first one to know. Then, we'll shake hands and go our separate ways."

A few days later, I got a call from Ken Mantell, who told me he was "overjoyed" that I was back in Texas, and that Fritz wanted to see me in his office before the TV taping that night. As soon as I walked into Fritz's office, he said, "It's good to have you back. How are the boys?"

I told him both of them were enrolled in school, and then I asked about Doris and his sons. We talked for awhile about the regular stuff that guys who haven't seen each other for a while talk about, and then we went over our deal: He was responsible for Chris Adams financially, and I was responsible for him creatively. I was responsible to promote him, pick his opponents, and put him in programs that would be best for him. I would also make the decision when to drop him off the main event and give him wins on TV to regenerate him. All of those things are very important, because so many guys get lost in the shuffle, or get to the top and after an eight week run they're finished because no one is watching out for them. It was the same deal I had with Fritz when I came in with Don Jardine seventeen years ago - so it wasn't like I was striking a new deal with him. It was "our deal." After Fritz and I shook on our deal, he hit me with, "Now I would like you to do me a favor. I want you to call up Ken and apologize for the trouble you caused him in May."

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

"You know. He wanted The Great Kabuki to take the fall and you refused."

"No, Fritz. I won't apologize for taking care of my gimmick and Jimmy Crockett's business. If that's what's required of me, then our deal is off."

At that point he backed off, and said, "OK, fine, but I want you to be nice to Ken."

I assured him, "Fritz, I have never been anything but nice to Ken Mantell."

Ken was the booker and I respected that. I never pushed my weight around unless it came to the wrestlers I managed, but I didn't care if it was Jim Barnett, Jim Crockett, or Bill Watts. No one messed with my talent, because that was the promise I made to the wrestlers I managed: To protect them and look after their best interests.

At the time that I started managing him, Chris Adams was equal in popularity to the Von Erich's because of his feud with Jimmy Garvin - who was generating a lot of heat with his manager, Sunshine. The office felt it would be really hard to switch Chris over, but I personally thought it wouldn't be a big deal at all. Not only did I think that Chris had the talent for it, but the fans were craving a good, solid heel. Aside from Jimmy Garvin, the lead heels at the time of my arrival were Killer Khan and The Missing Link - a couple of gimmicks, and not a competitor among the bunch. No one was paying money to watch them fight the Von Erich's, and the boys were basically without any real challengers. And in Texas, if the Von Erich boys didn't have someone to fight, there was no business, so I knew there was a lot riding on the success of Chris's heel turn.

After Chris signed with me on TV, he continued wrestling as a babyface and as a tag team partner to the Von Erich's. The first time I ever had any kind of friction with Ken Mantell was when he wanted to do the switch right away. I told him, "I don't think that would be good. When the people first see me with Kevin or Kerry at ringside, because I'm Chris's manager and it's a tag team match, they'll wonder what is going on. It will be better to lull them into a false sense of security, that maybe this is a workable thing."

I always believed in double crossing the fans, and never wanted them to know what was coming next. I liked that, and I think the fans liked that, but the powers that be wanted the money in the house as soon as possible. In any event, during Chris's matches where he would team with the Von Erich boys, I would become very bossy to Kevin and Kerry, acting like I was their manager, and shouting orders at them to do this and that. Sometimes they would listen to me, and sometimes they would stop and yell at me to back off. I would just keep yelling at them to "work on the arm!"

They would, but they would resent it. One day after a match, I jumped in the ring and put my finger in Kevin's face, telling him he had to listen to me. He blew up and knocked me on my ass, causing Chris to super-kick him - and we were off and running.

The Chris Adams and Kevin Von Erich feud became so hot that we took it to the Cotton Bowl, where Chris hit Kevin over the head with a wooden chair. As I pulled Chris back, I noticed that he had horribly opened Kevin up on his skull. Blood was just pouring out of his head, running onto the mat, and the people in the audience were traumatized. Girls were literally crying. Chris and I had to walk forty yards to get to the back, and if it hadn't been for Dallas's finest, we never would have made it. After awhile, they brought in a medi-vac, put Kevin on a stretcher, and left the Cotton Bowl with sirens blaring. Later that night, Baylor Hospital received so many calls about Kevin's situation that they requested all four news stations run bulletins

saying that Kevin was at the hospital, resting comfortably, and in stable condition. That was really something.

Then, I put Chris Adams and Gino Hernandez together as a tag team, and they began using the entrance song “Bad to the Bone,” by George Thorogood and The Delaware Destroyers. Chris and Gino made a great team, and really were a “Dynamic Duo.” I always had a happy family around me, and I made it very clear to them both, “We’re going to make a lot of money together, and have a lot of fun together. When we stop having fun, then it’s time for us to split up.”

I didn’t want or allow any dissension or turmoil within my group. I made it clear to them both that it was the group of us that could get us to the next level, and not the individual. Luckily, they got along very well. Gino got along with everyone, though. He was a sweet, wonderful kid, and understood that I was bringing him into an angle where Chris was situated as the lead heel. Gino was not a petty, jealous, or vindictive person, and would give anyone the shirt off his back. And over time, Chris and Gino became really good buddies.

By putting Chris with Gino, it enabled us to do some tag team matches with Kevin and Kerry. I felt that Kerry had really been diminished by only holding the NWA Title for a short time - and it showed in business. When he lost the belt so suddenly in Japan, it was a big letdown, and it took the heart out of the fans. David dying earlier that year under suspicious circumstances also took the heart out of the people. Therefore, as good as business was with Chris and Gino, it wasn’t up to the level of The Fabulous Freebirds and Christmas 1982.

Chris and Gino also teamed with Grizzly Smith’s son, Jake Roberts, to win the Six Man Tag Team Title at the Cotton Bowl. At the same time, Nick Roberts, who promoted Lubbock, got his daughter Nickla a job as Gino’s valet, and she would ironically later marry Jake’s brother Sam Houston in the Carolinas.

Eventually, Ken Mantell came up with this “brilliant idea” to bring in Sunshine’s “aunt” - Stella Mae French - to feud with us. Ken must have had a crush on Sunshine, or gotten some perverse pleasure just from the mere mention of her name, because she was seemingly intertwined in every single one of his angles, and why Stella Mae had to be Sunshine’s aunt is beyond me. Anyways, Stella was an old girl wrestler than Ken knew from Louisiana, who was now driving big rig trucks. One night before a show, Ken asked me to go out and slap Stella Mae around. I said, “You’ve got to be crazy. I’m not going to hit a woman.”

He insisted how great it would be if I got into a fight with her, so I compromised by saying I would insult her – but I wouldn’t raise a hand to her. There were certain things I wouldn’t do. I wouldn’t go out and demean homosexuals like I was asked to do in Amarillo by Dory Funk, Sr., I wouldn’t support the Holocaust like Bill Watts wanted me to do in Florida, and I wouldn’t beat up a lady. I didn’t care if someone gave me all the money in the world - that was my code, it served me well in wrestling, and I just wouldn’t go against it.

Because I was steadfast on my refusal to hit Stella Mae, Ken took me out of the scenario with Chris and Gino, and I was no longer their manager. When I learned of Ken’s decision, I told

Chris and Gino, “I would do anything I could to help you get over, but I also know what’s right and what’s wrong. When I’m asked to do something that I know in my heart is wrong – I can’t do it – but if you want to continue with this angle, God love you both, and I hope you do wonderful.”

That’s how my managing Chris and Gino ended – and there were no hard feelings. Of course, the Stella Mae angle went into the toilet.



# Chapter 40: The World Wrestling Federation

Jim Barnett was always very high on me, and was constantly trying to entice me to come into the WWF. At the same time, he was also in Vince McMahon's ear, encouraging him to hire me. During the fall of 1984, Vince McMahon called me to thank me for helping him score The Fabulous Freebirds and Kamala, and at the end of our conversation, he gave me his home phone number, and told me to give him a call when I was ready to make a move. When Ken Mantell began introducing Stella Mae French, I felt that the time was right, so I called Vince up and told him I was interested in jumping to the WWF. Vince was excited to hear that, and he invited me to come to a TV taping in St. Louis, Missouri, so we could speak more in-depth.

Tarzan Tyler was living in Dallas at the time, and we were friends because he had worked for me in Texas when I had the book. I told him I was looking to make a move to the WWF, and he said, "I know this kid from Montreal. He wrestles under the name of Cujo, is 6'7", weighs well over 350 pounds, and is very agile. If you meet with Vince McMahon, would you see if you could get him into the WWF, as well?"

I had known Tarzan for many years, and he had always done right by me. If he wanted me to use whatever influence I had to get a friend of his booked with the WWF, I was happy to oblige. I asked him to send me some pictures of Cujo, and was impressed with his look. Picture John Tenta – and that's what Cujo looked like. I was really curious to see him perform in the ring, because if I liked what I saw, I knew I could develop him into a monster to challenge Hulk Hogan. I even came up with a gimmick for him – thinking it would be interesting to bill him as being from Guyana as "the man who got away" - a subtle reference to the mass suicide that took place in Jonestown six years earlier.

I flew to St. Louis to meet with Vince at the Kiel Auditorium, and as soon as I walked into the building, Mr. Fuji approached me and loudly asked if I had any marijuana with me. I just looked at him and calmly said, "Fuji - you know I don't bring that stuff to the arena."

I then stood in the hallway and waited to speak with Vince McMahon. Eventually, he came out of a room where he and George "the Animal" Steele were having a heated discussion. Vince and I started speaking, and, just as I had promised Tarzan, I showed him Cujo's pictures. Needless to say, Vince was impressed, because he likes monsters. The next thing I knew, George Steele interrupted - because he and Vince were in some kind of flux at the time - grabbed Vince, and pulled him back into the room to continue their discussion. The last thing Vince said to me was, "I'll see you and Cujo at our house show in Landover – someone from my office will send you a plane ticket."

I only got three minutes with Vince that night, and I didn't see him again. Sure enough, a few days later, I received a plane ticket in the mail, and I flew into Washington DC the evening of the show. As soon as I arrived at the airport, someone was paging my name through the loudspeaker, announcing that I had a phone call. When I picked up the phone, I heard, "Gary, you don't know me, but my name is Howard Finkel, and I work for Vince McMahon. There's

been a mix-up, and Cujo's plane will be late. Will you stay at the airport, meet him, and bring him with you to Landover for the show tonight?"

Howard told me the gate Cujo was getting in at, and all the other pertinent information. I waited for an hour, but by 7:30 p.m., I was concerned because it was awfully close to show time and he still hadn't shown up. I found someone who worked at the airport and asked about the flight, and was informed that it had landed over two hours ago. I had a forty-five minute drive from D.C. to Landover, so I immediately jumped in a cab and got to the arena by 8:30 p.m.

As I walked in the building, the first person I saw was Hulk Hogan. He looked stunned when I walked through the door, and was clearly shocked to see me.

"Mr. Hart!" He exclaimed, "What are you doing here?"

It was the first and only time I ever met Hulk Hogan, and I sort of ignored and snubbed him - and I'm sure I came off as rude - because he was so nice to me and I was angry at someone else. I wish that I could have met him under a different set of circumstances, because I had always been really impressed with Hulk and was looking forward to meeting him.

I found Cujo sitting with a bunch of other guys, and asked him how long he had been there. He pretended like he couldn't speak English, and it was clear to me that he didn't want to speak to me at all. I then saw Rene Goulet, who I knew for years because he had worked for me in Georgia and Texas, and I asked him how long Cujo had been there. As soon as he told me that Cujo had been there since show time, I knew I had been set up.

I found Howard Finkel, and asked him why he paged me at the airport and asked me to wait for Cujo at the airport when he was already at the building. Howard told me that was what he was instructed to do by Jay Strongbow. The next thing I knew, Jay Strongbow walked over to me screaming, "Why are you getting here so late?"

I was trying to be on my best behavior, so I didn't respond to him, but I looked right at Howard and asked, "Does he have any stroke around here?"

"Yes," Howard replied. "He's one of Vince's top guys."

"Well, you tell Vince that if Jay Strongbow has any kind of power - I'm out of here, because I don't want anything to do with him."

I found Bob Orton, Greg Valentine, and Roddy Piper - who I was supposed to ride with to Poughkeepsie, New York, for a TV taping the next day - and told them I was leaving. I then picked up my bag and left the building.

Two days later, back in Dallas, I got a call from George Scott - who was Vince McMahon's booker - saying that he was calling from Vince's office. The first thing George said was, "Vince is really upset with you!"

“Oh, really!” I replied. “Is he upset that he’s got some asshole on his staff who, all because I fired him nine years ago in Georgia, tried to fuck me out of a job and left me sitting in an airport in Washington, DC?”

At that point, Vince got on the phone and said, “Gary, you came in and upset my dressing room!”

“I didn’t upset anything,” I told him. “I flew to Washington, DC on time and was left sitting at the airport by that fucking asshole Jay Strongbow – and if he has anything to do with the WWF, then I’m not interested in working there.”

“Well, I flew you in!” Vince argued.

“If that’s what’s bothering you – I’ll send you the price of my ticket.” I offered.

“No, that won’t be necessary,” he said. “Here – talk to George.”

George got back on the line and explained that they ended up not hiring Cujo after all, because he didn’t have his working papers. I told George that I was under the impression that Cujo and Tarzan Tyler had taken care of that, so it was really out of my hands. After we got that out of the way, George eased up a bit and told me the offer to come into the WWF was still on the table, asking if I would be interested in managing Brutus Beefcake. “No, thank you,” I said. “And thank Vince for the offer, as well, but I’m just not interested.”

That was the last contact I ever had with anyone from the WWF, and that was the way I left it. My experience with the WWF during that particular time – which was really just a brief moment – left a very bad taste in my mouth. After Vince asked me to come in and help out with talent, I was treated like some prelim jobber – and I had been in the business too long to be treated like that by anybody. I was never angry with Howard Finkel, because in his defense he didn’t know who Cujo was and wouldn’t have been able to pick him out of a lineup. However, I didn’t want to put myself in a situation where my future depended on someone like Chief Jay Strongbow – who was clearly out for revenge for what had happened between us in Georgia nine years ago.

I also didn’t like the first question that Mr. Fuji asked me in St. Louis, and I couldn’t help but think he was also trying to set me up, still bitter over what had happened in Georgia, as well. It was like stooge-city, and while I respected guys like Arnold Skaaland and Gorilla Monsoon, considering them to be top-of-the line guys, the WWF dressing room during that time was a hell-hole of politicians and locker room lawyers, and I could never have put myself in that kind of jeopardy. At that stage in my career, I didn’t need to deal with game playing or shark infested waters, and God only knows what kinds of things Strongbow and Fuji were telling Vince McMahon about me. It wasn’t worth the aggravation, and therefore, I came to the conclusion that the WWF just wasn’t for me.

# Chapter 41: Monkey Business

After getting any thoughts of a WWF run out of my system, I once again became completely focused on the Texas scene. Since my plans of creating a monster for Hulk Hogan to slay had been thwarted, I channeled that energy into creating a monster for the Von Erich boys to slay. I thought it would be unique to bring a new wrestler into Texas, claim he was from my neighborhood back in Chicago, and tell stories about how we used to “run together in a street gang.” At the time, Kerry Von Erich was being billed as “The Modern Day Warrior,” so I thought it would be cool to have a Warrior vs. Warrior feud. Therefore, I decided to name my new creation “The Halsted Street Warrior.”

I also really wanted to give the impression that he and I were tight, so I had to come up with a nickname for him. I’m a big fan of Creedence Clearwater Revival, and one of my favorite songs is “Bad Moon Rising.” I was listening to that song one day as I was falling asleep. When I woke up, the tape had looped and was it playing again. That’s when it hit me: His nickname would be “Moon.”

Knowing it would be important to bring the right guy in for this role, I remembered a young wrestler I had co-managed - along with Sir Oliver Humperdink when we ran H&H, Ltd. in North Carolina – named The One Man Gang. I knew he would be a perfect Halsted Street Warrior, so I immediately recruited him into Texas. At the time, The One Man Gang had long hair and wore tights, so I had to repackage him and change his persona in order to get the look I was envisioning. With his blessings, I shaved off the sides of his head, leaving just a Mohawk. I also got him a denim jacket with “The Halsted Street Warrior” written on the back, wrapped a bandana around his head, and instructed him to carry a chain to the ring. Even though he was still going to be billed as The One Man Gang, I explained to him that I wanted to give the impression that we were longtime friends from our gang days, so “when we talk back and forth on interviews, you’re Moon and I’m Slick.”

To top it off, I came up with this hair-brained idea that he should get two skulls tattooed on each side of his head - one with Kevin’s name, and the other with Kerry’s name. Amazingly, The One Man Gang agreed to do it, which I thought was very brave on his part. We went to a tattoo artist friend of mine and The One Man Gang patiently sat there for three hours while my friend drilled those Von Erich names into his head - an hour and a half for each side of his head. Then, during his interviews, not only would he talk about what he was going to do to the Von Erich’s, but he would point at the skulls on his head, as well. It was so subtle, but so powerful at the same time. A guy like Bam Bam Bigelow had his whole head tattooed, and because of that they were more or less not noticed. However, with just two skulls with Kevin and Kerry’s names on it, The One Man Gang’s tattoos had a real big impact. I think that of all the gimmicks I ever developed - that was one of my all-time favorites.

With his theme song, “Bad Moon Rising” by Creedence Clearwater Revival, The One Man Gang got over big time and was a perfect opponent for Kerry. On May 5, 1985, we took their feud to Texas Stadium for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual David Von Erich Memorial Parade of Champions. Over 26,000 people showed up that day to see them wrestle in a match with the stipulation being

that if Kerry beat The One Man Gang, I would have my head shaved for the second time - and this time it would be for life. The first time I shaved my head it was for ninety days, and I actually kept it shaved until I left Texas in 1983. I started growing my hair back out in North Carolina, because if you recall, I was going to lose my hair there with Jimmy Valiant. However, The Great Kabuki and I broke up before that could happen, so I was happy to lose it in a match against Kerry. After beating The One Man Gang, Kerry shaved my head in the middle of the ring, and I've kept it shaved ever since.

One thing I noticed upon my return to Texas was an overall atmosphere change from when I was the booker, and that the Texas booking office was no longer a tight, clean ship. Specifically, there was a real liberal attitude when it came to allowing drugs into the dressing room. Every Monday night at the Will Rogers Coliseum, I saw a line at the attending physician's door where he was dispensing prescription medication. The guys would get prescription medication for aches and pains like any other athlete would. They had sore muscles and needed to relax so they could get a good night's sleep and be able to wrestle thirty times a month. Most of the guys took the pills, managed their intake, used the medication until their injury was better, and would then get off of them. Some of the guys, however, got addicted to prescription medication, and would do anything to get their hands on it.

I saw Gino Hernandez ask doctors to burn moles off his back at the arena just so he could get prescription medication. This was not even a year after David Von Erich had died of an accidental drug overdose on prescription medication! I also saw guys who had been in line for prescription medication at the Will Rogers Coliseum line up later that week to meet with the attending physician in El Paso. They were getting their medication twice a week! As disturbing as those things were to me, no one else seemed to think there was anything wrong with that. Perhaps that was because it was "just" prescription medication, which was deemed acceptable in the 1980's. Prescription medication came from an esteemed, educated doctor in a white coat. Prescription medication was endorsed by the American Medical Association. Prescription medication was seen as very helpful in curing aches and pains so that people could sleep at night or work with pain. Prescription medication seemingly cured everything. If someone was too fat, a doctor would put them on drugs to lose weight. If someone had insomnia, they would take some prescribed medication in order to sleep. Taking pills to cure what ails you was par for the course back then. Nancy Reagan started "Just Say No," but she was saying "no" to street drugs. No one was saying "no" to prescription medication. Nobody seemed to look at prescription medication as dangerous drugs - but I did.

The guys in Texas who were taking the prescription medication definitely didn't see themselves as drug addicts. The way they saw it - it wasn't like they were going down into the 'hood to get their fix. They were going to the doctor and getting their medication under his watchful eye. Unfortunately, certain guys got addicted to prescription medication and it messed up their lives. Now I'm not saying that some of the guys didn't have a coke binge here or there, but it all started with prescription medication. Plus, keep in mind these guys were young. No matter how determined they might have been in the beginning to avoid cocaine, after a while, they couldn't keep saying no. They were so young and so over, that every party they went to they were the guest of honor, and people were constantly putting something in their hand or up their nose, and before they knew it, they got into the drug scene. It wasn't anybody's fault, it was just

the times. However, what I said about prescription medication earlier also applies to cocaine: Some guys were able to do recreational coke and never get strung out on it, and some guys got hooked on it.

When I got involved in the wrestling business in 1958, the great addiction was alcohol. By the 70's, marijuana became popular, and in the 80's, prescription medication and cocaine became in vogue. That's with any sport, though - whether it was wrestling, football, or baseball. In fact, cocaine became so popular in the 80's that it actually hurt marijuana sales!

I don't want to make it seem as if the entire dressing room was like Animal House, where everyone on the roster was going wild. Many of the guys wouldn't touch drugs. Take Bruiser Brody, for example. Sure, he might smoke a number occasionally, but he wasn't putting coke up his nose or throwing pills down his throat. However, the drug scene did concern me, and one thing that drove me crazy was when wrestlers would show up for work high. There was one occasion in Fort Worth where Kerry and Gino showed up and it was clear they were in no condition to perform. Even though I wasn't the booker, I was their friend, and I was very hard on them that night. I told them how disappointed and upset I was with them. I also told them that they were disrespectful - not only to the business, but also to their opponents who they were scheduled to wrestle that night.

I became so concerned with how out of control the prescription drug situation had become in the dressing room that I confronted the attending physician one night and asked, "Don't you think it would be proper that if these guys want prescriptions they should make an office visit?"

He didn't even answer me. He just gave me a look like who was I to tell him what to do. So I went to Fritz and told him, "A lot of the guys are using the attending physician as their personal chemist. I strongly suggest you talk to him and have him cut this out."

Apparently, Fritz did talk to him, and after that, if any of the guys wanted prescription medication, they had to make an appointment and go to a doctor's office. That made it more difficult for them to get medication - and was an added inconvenience. I certainly don't want you to think that it ended their growing dependency on prescription medication, because, unfortunately, it didn't.

The weird thing was that there was a sort of hypocrisy going on. As doctors were handing out drugs in the back, Fritz went on TV and introduced his hunting buddy, the Reverend Gary Holder, as the Chaplain for the promotion. Now, I hate to question people's faith - especially those who flaunt it - but I found that reprehensible. All of us, in one way or another, have some contact with a higher being, but to bring a preacher on a wrestling program and endorse him seemed like camouflage to me. Fritz did a lot of things I didn't agree with, though. I have my own code of morality, and having a Chaplain for the territory didn't fit that code. I think that a relationship with God is very personal thing. Fritz went to church, professed to be a good Christian, and did all the Christianly things that one would think a Christian would do. However, was Fritz a good Christian, and did his religion help him get through all the tragedy and hurt that he went through? I don't know - but I hope so.

In 1985, Fritz made another surprising move by signing a talent trading deal with Antonio Inoki and New Japan Wrestling - after having been associated with Giant Baba and All Japan for years. At the time, New Japan and All Japan were in an extremely heated war in Japan, so Fritz's defection was truly shocking. After all they had been through together over the years - especially in dealing with David's death in Japan - Fritz left Baba for a few dollars more. That's all it was in the end: More money for the compound.

I also noticed that business wasn't as good as it was when I had left, and realized that Ken Mantell wasn't that strong of a booker. And for those of you that think that since Texas wrestling was on fire in 1983 and he was the booker that he must be good - keep in mind that when I left in January of 1983, I had just brought in The Fabulous Freebirds and set up their feud with the Von Erich's. With the stable of talent and the angles set up that I left the territory with, anyone could have come in and booked Texas. Ken Mantell was in the right place at the right time and simply ran the company based on the Christmas night 1982 angle that I had booked. And that's not just sour grapes on my part - it's a fact.

And if it sounds like I'm taking "too much credit" for the big run in 1983 - keep in mind that I literally recruited the talent and set up the angles. Just because I was in the Carolinas while my angles played out does not negate my contribution to the success of the territory. It's just like when Jimmy Johnson left his position as head coach of the Dallas Cowboys in 1994, and then Barry Switzer came in and led the team - who Jimmy Johnson had recruited - to the Superbowl in 1996. Is it the coach that drafts the players or the coach who inherits them? Barry Switzer's abilities soon became exposed, because after 1996 it was all downhill for the Cowboy's - even to this day. And just like Barry Switzer couldn't maintain his success with the team he inherited, as soon as The Fabulous Freebirds left the territory, business started to go down in Texas, and Ken Mantell couldn't switch it and make it go back up. At that point, the chinks in his armor really started to show.

As things were crumbling around him, the only thing Ken seemed interested in was deciding what kind of banner should be around the ring and what color shirts the referees should wear. Those were his priorities. He also felt it was worth it to go out and spend \$1,500 to fly Sunshine into the Cotton Bowl in a helicopter. One thing he spent an inordinate amount of time figuring out was what kinds of dresses the valets should wear. I have heard it said that Ken Mantell became "famous" because of the way he utilized the valets - and got them involved in matches - as if that was his big contribution to our industry. The last time I checked, valets had been around since the days of Gorgeous George, and women's wrestling was around long before that. Another way I have heard people define Ken's "booking style" is that he was heavy on heel vs. heel matches - as if he created that concept, as well. Heel vs. heel matches were a Texas staple, and goes back to Danny McShain vs. "Wild" Red Berry, Bull Curry vs. Duke Keomuka, Fritz and Waldo Von Erich vs. Al Costello and Karl Von Brauner, Killer Karl Kox vs. Duke Keomuka, Mark Lewin vs. Toru Tanaka, and "Playboy" Gary Hart vs. JJ Dillon.

Ken Mantell could book a show, and as far as letting guys know where they were supposed to be, what they should be talking about, and what the finishes were, he was okay. However, he wasn't a matchmaker, he wasn't a TV producer, and when it came to creating and

developing new talent and long-term direction for the company, he didn't have that capability, either. He was just picking random people hoping to get something that clicked. However, his ideas were frighteningly bad. This is a Ken Mantell classic, and also the dumbest thing I ever saw in my life. Ken brought in a young wrestler and named him Lance Von Erich, claiming he was Waldo's son. How he talked Fritz into that one I'll never know. And if the actual idea wasn't bad enough, Ken's execution was disastrous. One day, a fan came up to me and told me that he had gone to school with Ricky Vaughn. I didn't know who he was talking about, so I asked, "Who the hell is Ricky Vaughn?"

The fan laughed, and said it was Lance Von Erich's real name. It turned out that the kid Ken brought in for the Von Erich cousin role was a famed high school athlete from Arlington, and everyone in Texas knew he wasn't a Von Erich. When I found that out, I asked Ken, "Didn't it occur to you that as tight as the Texas wrestling scene is, everyone will know he isn't a Von Erich?"

It backfired on Ken big time, and a lot of fans started cheering for wrestlers I managed against the Von Erich's, because at least I was who I said I was. A lot of fans came up to me saying that the Von Erich's were "liars" because they were claiming Ricky Vaughn was their cousin. It was bad, and why Ken needed another Von Erich was beyond me.

That's the difference between a booker and a matchmaker. A matchmaker really gets chemistry between people and builds on that, rather than coming up with ridiculous angles and insulting the audience. I fought that mentality my whole career, though. Certain guys would say that wrestling fans are "stupid," and I would always point out that they're not stupid - because if they don't like something, they'll get up and leave. Can wrestling fans be tricked? Yes. Do they like to be tricked? Yes. It's like a magic show. They want to be tricked, but don't ever look down your nose at wrestling fans and say they will buy anything we throw out there - because they won't. They'll turn the channel or quit showing up at the arena.

Ken brought in some other questionable talent to Texas, as well - such as Buck Zumhoff. Ken was very lax on a lot of things, as I detailed a few paragraphs earlier when discussing drugs in the locker room, and I don't know if he didn't know any better about Buck, or if he just didn't check people out before he brought them in, because Buck had a predilection for underage girls. After Ken brought Buck in from the AWA, Buck was found with a young girl living in an abandoned farmhouse that had no electricity close to Ken's place in Decatur - and was eventually sent to jail. That was yet another blemish on the Texas wrestling territory thanks to Ken's bad choices in talent.

There was also a completely different mindset that had permeated throughout the territory, because Ken allowed the wrestlers to walk out among the fans and sign autographs before the matches. When I was booking, I never allowed anyone on my crew to leave the dressing room and be seen out at the snack bar where fans could talk to them and associate with them, because I know that familiarity breeds contempt. Once a wrestler is out there among the people, there is no mystery, and the fans lose respect for them. For Ken to allow a guy with a gimmick like The Missing Link to mingle among the people would have been as idiotic as me telling The Great Kabuki, "Hey, Kabuki - why don't you go out there and get me a few hot dogs



and bring me back a Coke, as well. And if you want, sign some autographs and talk to the people.”

Speaking of The Great Kabuki, by 1985, he was back in Texas, as well. Since The Great Kabuki needed a manager, and he and I as a team were kaput, Ken put him with Sunshine - which I thought was the most ridiculous thing I ever saw in my life. He took one of the most vicious and scary attractions that had ever been created and de-balled him to the point that he had a one-hundred-and-twenty pound girl leading him around. In short, I was the guy who created and developed The Great Kabuki, and Ken Mantell was the one who destroyed him. I shouldn't just fault Ken, though. The Great Kabuki deserves some of the blame, as well. When I was managing him, I used to tell him over and over, “Whatever I give you and we develop - you have to protect, because if you don't, you'll end up where you were before, and nobody will care about you.”

Unfortunately, The Great Kabuki was just not sophisticated enough on his own to understand who he was and what he had become. I would see The Great Kabuki in the dressing room and we would talk occasionally, but I didn't do business with him, and never gave him any more suggestions on his gimmick. Of course, anytime Ken would tell him to do something preposterous, The Great Kabuki would come to me and ask, “Gary-son, what do you think?”

I would just tell him, “Don't do anything you don't want to do.”

When The Great Kabuki finally left Texas, he couldn't draw 3,000 people at The Sportatorium because of what Ken did to him with Sunshine and all that silly stuff. If it wasn't for his new-found success in Japan, The Great Kabuki would have been opening matches around the United States within a year. I really and truly believe that.

I should give Ken a little credit, though. Jimmy Garvin and his manager Sunshine were unique. Sunshine was an adorable, sweet little girl, who everyone loved, and bringing them into Texas was one of the few good choices Ken Mantell ever made. The other bright spot of Ken's booking was when he brought in Jim Cornette and The Midnight Express. Jim added excitement to the territory that was desperately needed, and The Midnight Express had tremendous matches with The Fantastics. Not only did Jim bring a lot of energy to the territory, but he put asses in the seats. He sold a lot of tickets because he was so obnoxious that everyone wanted to come and cuss him out.

I remember my first introduction to Jim. It was in 1977 while I was the booker in Dallas, and Jim was writing the programs for the Tennessee office. He called me up to see if he could interview me, and I was more than happy to oblige. Then, after he broke into the business as a manager, his character morphed into hybrid of me and Jim Barnett. His James E. Cornette name came from James E. Barnett, and his rich mother came from the gimmick that I had used in Houston during 1973. He even called me to ask if he could use the gimmick, and of course I gave him my blessings. Jim and I always got along perfectly, and he actually reminded me of myself when I was a kid. I always had a great deal of respect for Jim Cornette, because even though he had a tremendous fear of flying, he would get on an airplane to go to every show. I saw that kid fight his fear on a daily basis, and he white knuckled every flight. One time, we

were coming back from El Paso, and we hit some real turbulence. It was terrible. We were bouncing around the sky and Jim was literally freaking out. It got so bad that the plane landed in Lubbock so the pilots could check and see if anything had broken. It was that bad. Jim, Bobby Eaton, and Dennis Condrey got off the plane, rented a car, and drove to Dallas. Jim was scared to death of flying, and I always felt he was the bravest guy I ever knew.

Now, I should add an addendum on the credit I gave Ken Mantell for bringing in Jim Cornette and The Midnight Express, because he truly dropped the ball with them. Unfortunately, Ken felt that The Midnight Express were “too small” to work against Kevin and Kerry – so the obvious feud between them never took place. I didn’t see it that way at all, and knew that the fans would have loved to see the Von Erich’s against a phenomenal team like The Midnight Express. They would have especially loved to have gotten a chance to see the boys get their hands on Jim Cornette. There is not a doubt in my mind that the Von Erich boys would have had a great run with The Midnight Express – easily as good as the one the boys had with Chris and Gino, and perhaps even as good as their run with The Fabulous Freebirds – but Ken Mantell clearly didn’t agree.

Jim was extremely disappointed once he realized that The Midnight Express would never get a chance to face the Von Erich’s. One night, after a show in Dallas, Jim and I were talking about the situation, and he told me that he and The Midnight Express had an opportunity to go to the Carolinas. He knew I had been there, and asked me if I thought they would be a good fit. I encouraged him to go, because I knew they would do great in that territory, and it was clear that Ken was missing the boat with them in Texas. Jim and The Midnight Express did go and became huge stars on TBS – which by now was airing Jimmy Crockett’s wrestling show. World Class Championship Wrestling was instrumental in getting them that opportunity, though. A lot of guys don’t give World Class Championship Wrestling the proper credit that it deserves, but it helped a lot of major names in wrestling get their first big break and national exposure.

I started attending the booking meetings, but I only did it to protect the interest of my crew – which now included Mark Lewin, Tim Brooks, and The One Man Gang. Fritz would also attend some of the meetings, and I heard him say some awful things to Ken. If Ken suggested something Fritz didn’t like, Fritz would bark, “That’s the dumbest thing I ever heard in my life. You’re the worst booker I ever had!”

Ken would just sit there and laugh, saying, “Okay, boss, I’ll try harder.”

Fritz was a big, rugged, opinionated, egotistical bully, and he treated everyone like a doormat. Ken Mantell was his doormat, assistant booker David Manning was his doormat, spot show promoter Ed Watt was his doormat, and referee Rick Hazzard was his doormat. Since Fritz had a need to belittle people, to control people’s lives, and for people to kiss his ass, people like Ken, David, Ed, and Rick weaseled into positions that they weren’t qualified for, and their main job in life was to make Fritz feel good about himself. And for some reason - and I don’t know why - Fritz took pleasure in making other people look ridiculous. Fritz liked showing those in his clique that he was in charge and that he could do and act however he wanted. That was the essence of Fritz Von Erich, with two exceptions: “Bulldog” Danny Plechas and “Playboy” Gary Hart. We never took anything from Fritz, and that’s why we were with him for so long. We were

the only two guys who he could get an honest opinion from - and the only people who ever stood up to him. Everyone else kissed his ass. I can't speak for Danny, but the reason I handled Fritz the way I did was because I never looked at him as anything other than the guy I had wrestled in Detroit and Amarillo before he was a promoter. I never had a "boss" mentality with him, and if he ever tried to talk down to me - I would never have allowed it, because I was never afraid of losing my job.

I really didn't like going to the booking meetings because I wasn't the booker, and I didn't feel like giving my ideas or thoughts on the direction of the company. I wasn't getting paid for anything other than taking care of the wrestlers I managed, so mostly I kept my mouth shut. However, whenever I did speak up to discuss the wrestlers I managed - no matter what I would suggest - Ken would brush it off with, "That'll never work."

All I would ask was, "Why?"

He would never have an answer. You would think that with my successful track record, Ken would be happy to go along with anything I brought up. However, I felt some animosity from him because he was the booker, yet I was running my own programs. That wasn't that unusual, though. I had been doing that long before I ever became a booker. That was my responsibility - to take care of the wrestlers that I managed. He was also paranoid that I was looking to get his booking job - but I didn't want it. At that time in my life I wasn't interested in being in the office at 8:00 every morning five days a week. Why would I want all that trouble and aggravation for an extra \$700 when I was already making \$1,200 playing with my children in the pool during the day and hanging out with my friends at night? Believe me when I tell you, I didn't want his job. If Ken would have been more open to the ideas I offered him I would have been more than happy to help him. However, he was threatened by the tremendous success I had not only in Texas, but in other territories, as well, and didn't like the fact that I was instrumental in establishing the Von Erich boys, Bruiser Brody, and The Fabulous Freebirds in Texas, and he really didn't like the fact that Fritz respected me for both my knowledge and the accomplishments I had in wrestling.

And even though Ken thought he was a genius, he was just a booker. A lot of people have been bookers, but there are very few guys like me, Ole Anderson, Pat Patterson, Dusty Rhodes, George Scott, and Bill Watts - and I do consider myself in that very elite group, because we were the main group of high-profile, long-term, successful bookers from the 70's into the 80's. There were other bookers who were good - like Louie Tillett, George Becker, and Tom Renesto - but they would really just get a list of good guys and bad guys and put them against each other. The six bookers in my group truly developed and created guys - and found guys with charisma. We had a real feel for how to get money out of the business - and we also had a lot of experience. I had booked in Florida, Georgia, Texas, and North Carolina. Dusty Rhodes had booked in Florida and the Carolinas, Ole Anderson had booked both Georgia and the Carolinas, and Bill Watts had booked Oklahoma, Georgia, and Florida. George Scott, meanwhile, had booked the Carolinas and the WWF along with Pat Patterson. Those were all big, high-profile booking jobs - and we were all very successful.

Ken Mantell wasn't in our class at all, not only because he had no experience prior to Texas, but also because he didn't have the opportunity to assist someone like Ole Anderson. When I was around Bill Watts and Jim Barnett, I sucked up all their knowledge. Dusty Rhodes took every opportunity he could to learn from Eddie Graham. Ken, meanwhile, was sitting there in Texas with no experience and no insight to what the booking job entailed, and not once did he show any interest or take any initiative to pick my brain and learn how to develop and create talent. The sheer apathy he displayed is why I consider him an incompetent booker, and why he ultimately wasn't successful.

By that time, even though I was no longer managing Chris and Gino, anytime they needed advice, they would come to me. One time, they told me about an angle that Ken Mantell had devised for them. Chris explained, "We're going to have a match where we get our heads shaved for ninety days, but as soon as Kevin and Kerry shave our heads, we'll put masks on. Then, after our hair grows back, we'll take off the masks!"

I gave them my honest opinion, saying, "Boys, that's a road to disaster. You cannot advertise that you will shave your heads and keep it shaved for ninety days, and then screw all the people by coming to the ring in a mask."

They were surprised that I was taking that attitude, and Gino said, "Well, we like it and Ken likes it, so that's what we're going to do."

"If that's what you want to do, then do it, but from my point of view, you're making a major mistake," I warned them. "As soon as you show up on TV with the masks, you'll disgust the people and lose the respect of the fans. Plus, why would anybody want to pay to see you with masks on?"

They paid me no heed, and sure enough, by double crossing the fans, their angle went right into the toilet and their program with the Von Erich's died on the vine.

A short time after, some of the boys were in the dressing room talking about the Chris and Gino mask debacle, and Mark Lewin stated that it was the dumbest booking idea he had ever seen. Someone spoke up in Ken's defense and argued that Ken had done a "pretty good job" as booker thus far. Mark shot back, "What are you talking about? With the talent pool and angles that Gary left, a monkey could have run this place!"

Not long after that, I got a call from Ken Mantell, who wanted to see me in his office. I went to his office and sat down, and Ken said, "I'm going to let Mark Lewin go."

"Why? What has he done?"

"He was smoking marijuana behind the Will Rogers Auditorium." Ken replied.

"Ken, you and I have smoked marijuana behind that building!" I said incredulously. "This is now a firing offense?"

“It doesn’t matter what we did in the past,” he said. “I have to let Mark go. Period.”

At that point, I was pissed. I knew that what Mark said about Ken riding on my success got back to him - and it obviously touched a nerve.

Well, sometimes the truth hurts.

I stood up from my chair and said, “Then if you’re letting Mark go - I quit.”

# Chapter 42: On the Road with Abby and Brody

Ken Mantell ran the Texas booking office on a boss mentality like Ole Anderson and Bill Watts, and was looking to show Mark Lewin that even though I was taking care of his programs and looking after his business – Ken Mantell was “the man in charge.” I didn’t like his feeble reason for firing Mark - so I quit in protest.

Doing things like that was why I had success with the people I managed. They knew that if there were games being played in the office, I would do everything in my power to protect them. They knew my attitude was, “United we stand – united we fall.” I would even ask my guys, “When I go to battle for you in the office, how far do you want me to take it? Do you want me to stop short of getting fired or go all the way if need be?”

That’s the way I was – with them one-hundred percent. Because of that reason - the extreme loyalty I had for my wrestlers - I had no regrets after walking away from the Texas booking office.

I also wasn’t overly concerned with where my next paycheck was coming from, because there were plenty of options for me. I could easily have made a phone call to Jimmy Crockett and Dusty Rhodes and gotten myself back into the Carolinas, but instead, I decided to use my exposure on World Class Championship Wrestling to my advantage. World Class Championship Wrestling aired in eighty-five cities throughout the United States and in twenty-five foreign countries. The show was everywhere, and whoever was on it was a bona-fide star. However, even though the show was seen everywhere, the wrestlers on the show were from the Texas booking office – so the only way anyone could see them live was if they were in Texas. So I got in touch with Bruiser Brody and Abdullah the Butcher - both of whom had a lot of exposure on World Class Championship Wrestling, as well - and worked out a deal where I would become their booking agent and manager, and we would travel around the independent circuit together going to all the cities that had World Class Championship Wrestling.

I was confident that it would be a success, because for an independent promoter to bring the three of us into his promotion as a package deal – with all of our television exposure and name value – was a real coup. Plus, aside from just being able to advertise actual stars of World Class Championship Wrestling for a one-off show, if the promoter was interested in building their business and drawing money long-term, they couldn’t bring in better talent than Bruiser Brody and Abdullah the Butcher. Having me in their corner and on the mike was just the icing on the cake.

During that time, whenever Bruiser or Abby would get calls from promoters looking to book them, they would tell them to call their “boss,” and would then give out my number. I had to tell Brody, “Don’t be telling people I’m your ‘boss.’ Tell them I’m your agent.”

I felt that sounded more dignified. Brody didn't want to hear it, and insisted, "Nope. You're my boss."

The three of us had been through so much together, we had an excellent working relationship, and were the best of buddies. So if Brody wanted me to be the boss – that was fine by me.

World Class Championship Wrestling was so popular that offers started pouring in, and we were never stuck for a place to go. I would always serve as Abdullah's manager, but with Bruiser Brody, sometimes I managed him, and sometimes I managed Abdullah against him. Bruiser was very unique in that regard. If a promoter had a big strong babyface, Bruiser Brody could come in and be the ultimate heel. At the same time, if another promoter had a big strong heel, Bruiser Brody could come in and be the ultimate babyface. I don't know many guys who could do that.

Independent wrestling was a tough circuit, though, because oftentimes the promoters – most of them not known for being honest and upright - tried to mistreat the talent and pull a few quick ones. I got us booked on shows all throughout New England for a group called International Championship Wrestling. After our first show in Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, the promoter, Mario Savoldi, told us he would pay us on the very last day of the tour. Business was pretty good for that tour - drawing at least \$7,000 each night. Also on the tour were my old friends Mark Lewin and Curtis Iaukea, as well as Blackjack Mulligan, Barry Windham, and Kevin Sullivan.

After the last show of the tour – which was a TV taping in Bangor, Maine - I went to collect our money and Mario told me, "Let me get everything straight. I'll go get something to eat, count up my money, and then I'll catch you back at the hotel and pay you there."

Bruiser Brody and I went back to our hotel room and waited a couple of hours – but we never got a call. Finally, we went down to Mario's room and pounded on his door – but got no answer. I was pissed, because I accepted those bookings from Mario figuring "like father like son." His father - Angelo Savoldi - was an honest, upright, and honorable man. He had been very involved with the WWWF, was close to Vince McMahon and Toots Mondt, and was a trusted ally in their organization. His word was gold and everyone loved him. Unfortunately, Mario wasn't like his dad, and clearly wasn't cut from the same cloth. Since no one was answering Mario's hotel room door, Brody and I went out, got ourselves a large pizza and a large 2x4, and then sat in the hotel hallway right in front of his door. When Mario finally stepped off the elevator at 4:30 a.m., he saw me sitting in front of his door - and Brody right next to me with his legs crossed, a 2x4 lying across his lap, and an empty pizza box sitting there. Mario looked shocked, because he thought he could out-wait us.

"Hey, man – where have you been?" I asked.

"I was going to take care of you guys in the morning." He stammered.

"It is the morning," I pointed out. "Give us our money."

Needless to say, we got our money.

Abby, Brody, and I even went a couple of times to Hawaii for Ms. Maivia, because she loved World Class Championship Wrestling so much. That was a particularly wonderful deal, because by going there, I was basically on vacation, but making a very good living. All three of us did very well financially with our dates, and always drew well, because World Class Championship Wrestling had made us all big names in wrestling. I even got us booked on some shows in Alabama, and there was one show in Birmingham where I managed Abdullah against Jerry Lawler. I was having the time of my life. All I had to do was get on a plane, go to a town, and hang out with my friends.

Don't get me wrong, though - as much fun as it was and as much money as we were making, we worked our asses off and traveled a lot. Once word got out that we were accepting independent dates, I got some unique requests, including some bookings down in Venezuela - because World Class Championship Wrestling was very popular down there. We actually went to Venezuela several times, and were always treated first class all the way. We even went down to Monterrey, Mexico. The promoter brought the three of us in to headline a few shows, and filled the rest of the cards up with local wrestlers. Since I had traveled extensively back when I was in Australia, my philosophy was: When in Rome, do as the Romans do. So wherever we went, I ate the local food and mingled with the local people. I always understood that I was a guest in whatever country I was visiting, and treated the locals with respect and wasn't the ugly American. And in return, I never had any problems from them.

I also started going with Abby and Brody on their trips to Puerto Rico. Bruiser had a good relationship with promoter Carlos Colon, and Abdullah had been with him for twenty years, so they assured me that he was a sweet, nice guy, and a man of his word. Sure enough, Carlos was wonderful to me, and always paid me what he said he would. The three of us would go to Puerto Rico for fourteen days, and then go home for two weeks and take independent dates in the states. It was a wonderful schedule, and we appeared on all of the big shows in Puerto Rico, such as the Three Kings Spectacular. Carlos Colon wrestled Ric Flair that night, and I managed Abdullah against Brody. That was a tremendous card.

One particular evening, I was managing Abdullah against Carlos Colon in a big baseball stadium in Trinidad, and I jumped on the apron and hit Carlos. As soon as Carlos fell, Abdullah pinned him, and it seemed like everyone in the stadium headed towards the ring. They were so angry over what we had just done to Carlos that they were out for blood. Now, Abdullah is a big guy, but he outran me that day back to the dressing room. He would run, stop, grab a couple of breaths, and just as I would catch up to him, he would be off again! There were cops on horseback literally running over the people because of the riot we caused. That night after the matches, Bruiser Brody, Terry Funk, Dory Funk, Abdullah, and I had to sneak out of the arena in a bus.

There were quite a few scary incidents in Puerto Rico. One night in Ponce, I was managing Abdullah against Giant Baba. At some point in the match, the fans completely ambushed the ring. Even though Carlos provided security, nobody seemed to stop them, and they



literally had me surrounded. I had to cut three people with my trusty razor just to protect myself. When I slashed them and the mob saw the blood, they became concerned, but kept coming at me! In America, if I did that to someone, everyone would run. In Puerto Rico - they didn't. It was a very dangerous situation, and the only reason I got out of it was because the fans were deathly afraid of Abdullah. Fortunately, he came to my rescue and got me out of there - but it was a hairy situation.

Apart from those incidents, Bruiser, Abby, and I had wonderful times in Puerto Rico. We would hang out and play cards all day, and Abdullah would always cheat and stick cards under his ass so we couldn't see them. Bruiser and I would just let him win, though, because we weren't about to pay him, anyhow. I never brought my family to Puerto Rico, but I would have had no objections to it. And if Carlos had asked me to come and book for him, I would have done it in a New York second, and happily moved my family down with me.

## Chapter 43: Texas All-Star Wrestling

Around this time, Fred Behrend, who was Fritz Von Erich's promoter in San Antonio, broke away from the Texas booking office and formed his own promotion - Texas All-Star Wrestling. In late 1985, Fred contacted me to see if I would come in and run his business, offering me \$1,000 a week and a Mercedes Benz, so I took it.

When I arrived, business wasn't that great, so I knew I needed to do something big to spike attendance. Bruiser Brody had been a beloved hero in Texas since I turned him babyface in 1979, so I brought him into Texas All-Star and had him immediately challenge all of the babyfaces - well aware of the fact he was still considered a hero on World Class Championship Wrestling. However, that's what made Bruiser Brody unique. He really wasn't a "heel" or a "babyface" - he was Bruiser Brody. He was just a kick-ass guy and it didn't make any difference if he was loved or hated, because his persona never changed - no matter who he was matched up against. So when I made the decision for him to come in and challenge the babyfaces in Texas All-Star, he went along with it because he trusted my judgment and understood what I was doing, and didn't worry about the fact that he was "loved" in Dallas.

Brody, of course, got over huge, and during my time in Texas All-Star, I also brought in Abdullah the Butcher, Tim Brooks, Chris Adams, and The One Man Gang. Once word got out that I was the booker in San Antonio, I received a phone call from Dennis McCord. He was still wrestling as Austin Idol - by now in the Pensacola area - and asked if there were any openings for him. I was happy to bring him in, and as soon as he got to Texas, I put the USA Title on him. However, I was disappointed to see that over the years he had developed a superstar attitude. Sure, he drew some money in the south, but he wasn't a Ric Flair or Harley Race - yet he acted like he was. I also brought in Afa the Samoan and his nephews - The Tonga Kid and Kokina. Afa and The Tonga Kid were coming off of huge runs in the WWF, and Kokina would later go on to become WWF Champion Yokozuna. I always enjoyed using the Samoans, because they are all happy-go-lucky guys, good workers, and weren't aggravating. I had even used Afa's son Samu back when I had booked Texas for Fritz Von Erich.

I had a nice young kid name Fred Ottman on my crew, who later went on to find fame as Typhoon in the WWF. Another young guy already on the roster was Shawn Michaels. He had just started wrestling, and was a very talented kid and a good worker, so I instantly took a liking to him. When I learned that he had been trained by none other than Jose Lothario and Joe Blanchard, I became a little concerned about the ga-ga they might have filled his head with. So in order to show Shawn that whatever nonsense he may have heard about me was off the mark, I made him and his tag team partner Paul Diamond - who were known as American Force - the USA Tag Team Champions. Now, I want to make it clear that I didn't do that just to show Shawn I was a fair guy - I did it because I knew that Shawn and Paul would do a good job as champions. My two sons would hang out with Shawn in the dressing room and play football with him in Austin and Corpus Christi, and I would always tell them, "Remember the name Shawn Michaels, because he's going to become a main event wrestler someday."

To add some excitement to the promotion, I held a tournament for something I called “The Texas Cup,” featuring all the aforementioned names on my crew, as well as guys like Blackjack Mulligan and Wahoo McDaniel. The finals were held at the Hemisphere Arena in San Antonio, and it was such a success that 8,000 fans showed up!

After Fred left the Texas booking office, and before he hired me, he promoted some shows with Joe Blanchard. That didn’t last too long and their partnership dissolved - but they still shared adjoining offices in the same building. Therefore, when I would show up to the office, I would occasionally see Joe in the hallways. Fortunately, we were both mature about what went down in the past, and would simply say “hello” to each other. The funny thing was, even though Joe wasn’t promoting anymore, he had a really plush, beautiful office, with big couches and chairs - while Fred’s office was totally low rent, with just a couple of plastic chairs. Because Tim Brooks and I were living in Dallas but staying in San Antonio during the work week, we figured that since we had access to Joe’s office - why should we rent a room? So at night, after everyone left, Tim and I would sneak into Joe’s office and sleep on his comfortable couches. And the office secretary - Janie Engle - would dutifully wake us up every morning so that Joe could never catch us! Then, after Janie would wake us up, Tim and I would jump in the Mercedes Benz that Fred gave me and go have breakfast.

Fred treated me so well that I actually considered moving my family to San Antonio to work for him long term. However, after a while, I noticed things just didn’t seem right. I started getting calls at the office, and it was always the same theme: Fred owed somebody money. The newspaper said they hadn’t gotten paid for the ads, the arena manager called looking for the security deposit, production companies were calling wondering why their invoices weren’t being paid, and the TV station complained that they never got paid to run the tape. A couple of times we were within hours of them not airing the tape, and Fred had to scramble and get money to the TV station so they would play it.

I soon realized that Fred was a total cocaine freak, and sometimes in his stupor, he wouldn’t put the deposits up for the buildings, because every dime he could beg, borrow, or steal was going up his nose. He thought he was a big time promoter, when he was really nothing more than a drug addict. Once I realized what Fred’s problem was, I saw my job there as tenuous, at best, because he could have big money today and no money tomorrow. A couple of times I would ask Janie Engle for a \$1,000 advance, but what I was actually doing was ensuring I got paid for the week. Fred would go crazy when I did that, screaming, “I had that money earmarked for something else!”

“For what?” I would yell back. “Cocaine?”

The writing was on the wall that this was going to be a short time gig for me. Fred Behrend wasn’t financially or mentally capable of keeping Texas All-Star Wrestling afloat, so I quickly got out of there and the promotion went downhill once I left.

It’s funny, but because I left Texas All-Star in such an abrupt manner, the rumor went around that I had been sent there at Fritz Von Erich’s behest in order to “kill Fred’s business.” I didn’t take it personally, though, because I had heard the same rumor about Bruiser Brody and

Mark Lewin – all because they had one bad match for Fred back in the summer of 1985. All of those rumors of Fritz sending me, Brody, and Lewin in to kill off Texas All-Star are just nonsense, though, because Fritz was already selling out in San Antonio with the Von Erichs, Gino Hernandez, and Ric Flair, and couldn't have cared less what Fred Behrend was doing. I mean, we're not talking about Jim Barnett or Vince McMahon here, we're talking about some coked-up car salesman. The fact of the matter is that Fred Behrend didn't need any help in killing off his promotion, and the only thing that killed it off was Fred's incompetence.

Just as I was making my exit from Texas All-Star Wrestling, I received a phone call from Sherwood Cryer, who owned Gilley's Bar in Pasadena. Gilley's became internationally famous because of the John Travolta film - Urban Cowboy. Sherwood told me that he had a 2,000 seat coliseum directly behind Gilley's and was interested in promoting wrestling shows there. He invited me to Pasadena so that we could meet and discuss the possibility of doing business together.

I went to Pasadena and spent some time with him, and found him to be a delightful old curmudgeon and a wonderful guy - much like Fritz Von Erich's father, Papi. Sherwood and I hung out for a few hours, and he told me that he wanted me to produce a weekly wrestling show at Gilley's, and that he would give me a budget of \$5,200 a week, from which I was to pay for everything - the wrestlers, the referees, and the ring. I knew I could give him good shows on that budget, so we struck a deal.

I brought in guys like Bruiser Brody, Abdullah the Butcher, Terry Gordy, and The One Man Gang, and the nights we had our shows were great, because we had the run of Gilley's. Drinks, food, and whatever else we wanted were on Sherwood. One night, I got to meet Fats Domino - who was playing there. I couldn't believe it. There I was, a kid from the streets of Chicago, hanging out with Fats Domino at 3:00 a.m. after the bar had closed! I kept asking him to play "Blue Monday" for me one more time! I also met Chuck Berry and Tanya Tucker, as well. They were as fascinated and intrigued by us as we were by them! It was a great time.

After seeing the success of the shows I was booking, Sherwood wanted to take it further, telling me, "I would like to do some TV, because that Sportatorium sure got famous, and I never heard of it before World Class Championship Wrestling."

Sherwood was very smart. He saw that by producing a wrestling show out of his venue and syndicating it like World Class Championship Wrestling, it would be a great way to promote Gilley's and the other things it had to offer. He asked me what it would cost, and I explained that to produce a show like World Class Championship Wrestling would cost him \$10,000 an episode. That's with five cameras, a sound system throughout the building, high quality commentators, and extraordinary talent. He asked if there was a way we could cheapen it, and while we could economize here and there, since he wanted syndication, we had to be able to produce a quality product fifty-two times a year.

Unfortunately, the TV deal never developed, but during the time I promoted for Gilley's, we all had a great time, and Sherwood was a wonderful guy.

## Chapter 44: Gino

During my time away from Dallas, I continued to keep in touch with Chris Adams and Gino Hernandez, and became increasingly concerned for Gino's well being, because he had developed a cocaine habit that was really out of hand. I was on him quite a bit about his addiction, because it was hard for me to watch him go through that. I knew that Gino was a real party boy, and I became desperate to do something to get him away from his environment. I actually thought that if I could get Gino out of Texas and into another territory where he didn't have his connections, I could get him on the straight and narrow. I went so far as to call up Jimmy Crockett, who I always had an open door policy with, and made a deal to go to the Carolinas in January, 1986. When he asked who I wanted to manage, I told him that I would bring in Gino and Chris as a tag team, and The One Man Gang in as a single. Needless to say, Jimmy was thrilled with that idea.

With that, I had a perfect opportunity for Gino to get out of Texas, and a way for me to spend more time with him and watch over him. I went to have a meeting with Chris and Gino in their condo that they shared together, where I planned on selling them on the Carolinas. I was really hoping that my plan would work, as I really wanted to get Gino out of Texas as soon as possible. When I got there, I told them, "Boys, we have a chance to go to the Carolinas and make a lot of money."

To my dismay, no matter how hard I tried to convince them, they were flat-out not interested in leaving Texas. I called Jimmy Crockett back, and told him the deal was a no-go. Looking back, and knowing what I know now, maybe his being in the Carolinas wouldn't have made any difference on his habit - but believe me, I was trying.

Five days after I made my proposition to Chris and Gino, I was away from home when my wife called. She didn't sound well at all, and asked, "Are you by yourself?"

"No, Tim Brooks is sitting here with me."

"I have terrible news," she said. "Gino died."

The second she said that, I went numb and cried for an hour. I actually think I went into shock, because all I remember was Tim Brooks cursing. He said every curse word you could ever say. He just cursed on and on. Then, I cried for an hour. Tim and I were heartbroken that day.

People love to read into things and hypothesize, so it's only natural that there are a lot of rumors surrounding Gino's death. Some people claim he died of suicide, while others cry murder – saying it was some sort of a mob hit or drug dealers exacting revenge. The reason people suspect foul play is because Gino occasionally hung around with some guys who were connected, and also because he sometimes got paranoid. However, it needs to be taken into consideration that, when someone does a lot of cocaine, paranoia will naturally set in. In my opinion, Gino was not killed, and he did not commit suicide. Just as Sigmund Freud once said,

“Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar” - sometimes an accident is just an accident. My feeling is that Gino Hernandez died of an accidental cocaine overdose, similar to when David Von Erich overdosed on too many pain pills in Japan.

And even though I thought I had seen it all when Fritz raised the prices of David's pictures at his Memorial show in 1984, nothing prepared me for the despicable way Ken Mantell chose to handle Gino's death. Right before Gino died, he was involved in an angle where he “blinded” Chris Adams. After Gino was found dead, Ken Mantell instructed Bill Mercer to tell the Texas fans about the two recent tragedies they were suffering from, and to equate Gino's death – which was real - with Chris's “blindness” – which was a work. Now, I'm not saying I'm holier than thou, but to watch Ken Mantell manipulate the death of someone that I loved just to make a few bucks in an angle disgusted me. It was repugnant. I understand that wrestling is a work, but there comes a time and a place where we need to be honest about what is going on, and I resented that whole “angle” very much.

I hate going to funerals, because I don't want to remember my friends lying in a coffin. I want to remember the good times and the happy times we shared together. The only time I go to anything like that is when I'm badgered into it by others, and made to feel I'm less than human if I don't go. So at the behest of Tim Brooks, I went with him to Gino's wake in Houston. We were standing in the back of the room, and Tim whispered, “Come on, let's go up and pay our respects.”

“Tim, I don't know if I can do this. I feel sick.”

Thankfully, Tim was very supportive, saying, “Come on, Gary - I'm with you.”

I got myself together, mustered all of the courage I could, and Tim and I walked up to Gino's casket. The hardest thing I ever did in my life was walk up to Gino's casket. That was really hard. I bent over and kissed the casket, then kneeled down and said a little prayer.

When I stood up, Paul Boesch walked over, put his arm around me, and said, “Our boy is gone.”

We just stood there for a long time. I don't know how long. All the crap with the wrestling wars, and who was right and who was wrong had no meaning at all that day. Without words, any problems that Paul and I had, and any grief that we had caused each other over the years just went away. It was over and gone.

Paul and I realized what we had just lost, and although we were both so angry at Gino, we also loved him and cared about him so much. Gino's death was a healing process for me and Paul, and it finally brought us together. Of course, I would prefer to still be mad at Paul if it meant I could have Gino back.

After the wake, Paul introduced me to his new wife - a wonderful, sweet lady, who had a little boy named Joey. He was a blind boy, and Paul took him under his wing, and he became like a son to Paul - much like Gino was. After the wake, we all went to the gravesite, where Paul and

I stood at the head of the coffin together. As they lowered Gino's casket down, a gust of wind came, and up in the trees there were bells and wind chimes, and they started making noise. I looked at Paul and asked, "Could that be Gino?"

Paul replied, "He always was a great showman."

If it hadn't been for the bells in the trees, my memory of that day would have been different. However, because of that, I can have a good memory and thought.

I know I'm coming off like a contradiction in character: Fearlessly slashing people with a razor one second, yet not being able to handle a wake another. Yes, I can be a tough, brave guy when my ass is on the line, but when the situation involves someone that I really care about, it's very difficult for me to be brave. Besides, it's not like Gino was just some wrestler I managed, or simply a dollar sign to me when I was his booker. We had a very personal relationship, and when I get close to someone, I really get close to them. When they're happy, I'm happy. When they hurt, I hurt. And when they die - a part of me dies, as well.

Yes, I know that there is a sinister, macabre image that I project to wrestling fans, and that Chris Adams once labeled me "the Vincent Price of wrestling." However, there is a softer side to me, too, for people that I really care about.

As I mentioned earlier very briefly - I grew up without a dad. He left before I was born. I had known Gino since he was a little kid, and a similar thing had happened to him. Over the years, Gino Hernandez became like my own son, and I really loved him. He was very special to me, and if he had lived, God only knows what he would have accomplished.

I know in my heart that I always tried to set a good example for Gino. I didn't always accomplish that, but I always tried to. And God knows I also tried to get him help, but nothing I tried ever worked, because he was such a free spirit. In the end, Gino's demons won out and took him from us. His death was a hard time for me, and it really messed me up for a while.

Gino Hernandez will always have a very special place in my heart.

## Chapter 45: World Class

Over the years, Fritz Von Erich and I had numerous conversations about important business matters, and I was privy to everything and anything when it came to his booking office. Even when I wasn't his booker, I was still one of his top confidantes, and he would regularly call me and ask my opinion on all-things pertaining to his wrestling business.

In early 1986, Fritz called me and told me he was considering seceding from the NWA, because after Kerry lost the NWA Title to Ric Flair in 1984, the NWA board assured Fritz that he would get it back, but kept reneging. By 1986, Fritz had reached an "I'll show them" mentality, and was threatening to withdraw his membership over it. I was totally against the move, implored him to reconsider, and even told him it would be the kiss of death for his territory. For years the Texas booking office had presented the National Wrestling Alliance as the premier wrestling organization in the world. I reminded him how we brought in Ric Flair, Harley Race, Lou Thesz, Pat O'Connor, and The Funks, and the NWA was our centerpiece. By leaving, I pointed out, the Texas office would become just like what we ridiculed: the WWF and the AWA - secondary and no longer affiliated with the best of the best. Nobody in Texas took the WWF or the AWA seriously, and I knew they wouldn't take his promotion seriously, either. The other reason I knew it would be a horrible mistake was because it was a decision made out of rage, and you never do yourself a favor when you let your emotions sway important decisions.

Unfortunately, Fritz was very controlling, and wanted to be in control of his destiny – and the World Title. For him to come off as "Fritz Von Erich the tough guy boss" was more important to him than abiding by the NWA rules. I felt that by him doing something that detrimental to his own business, he either hated himself or had just gotten too damn arrogant to play nicely with others - and I don't think he hated himself.

When the announcement was made in February, 1986, it was a humongous deal in the wrestling world, because Fritz was the first ex-President to leave the NWA. Yes, looking back one can say the NWA was disintegrating anyhow, but Fritz left the NWA before it was at the point of being non-existent. Jimmy Crockett was doing big business in the Carolinas, Bob Geigel was still doing business in Kansas City, Don Owen was still in operation in Portland, and the Florida promotion was alive, as well. Being a member of the NWA was crucial, because if he needed help with a big show to fend off a competitor, other promoters would send their top guys in to help him out. Plus, if he ever needed a new booker, he could have asked the other promoters if there were any booking assistants out there who could come and take the reins in Texas. As you'll read in this chapter, that really could have come in handy. However, because he was no longer a part of the NWA – he would have no one to turn to. It was a tremendous loss.

He was also going to miss out on having a great world champion like Ric Flair. I talk about how amazing the Von Erich boys were – but keep in mind that Ric was one of the guys wrestling them in those classic matches. When I was Fritz's booker, I had access to the world champion on a regular basis. Even if business wasn't going well, I knew that if I brought in Ric for a week, I could get at least half a house – because the NWA Title was money in the bank. It meant that much, and had a tremendous impact. Even though the Texas wrestling fans loved the



Von Erich's and Bruiser Brody – they also loved Ric Flair, because he was a class act and something special. How could Fritz replace him as the only World Champion in the fans minds? There was no way to replace that! Ric Flair was a very important part of Texas wrestling, as was Harley Race before him.

Sure, Fritz could create his own World Champion – and he did - but the Texas fans were conditioned to believe there was only one World Title that mattered. Even though they were fans of Texas wrestling, they were indoctrinated like the rest of the NWA fans that if it didn't say NWA, then it wasn't a world title - it was a regional title. I knew that was how Texas wrestling fans would look at Fritz's promotion, and no matter how he spun it – it would never be the same. You just don't spend decade after decade, champion after champion, hurling the National Wrestling Alliance at your audience and then one day just say they're not relevant. I actually didn't know how much more the Texas fans would take. David and Gino had died under suspicious circumstances, and now Fritz had to announce to them that he was leaving the NWA. This was a new era for Texas wrestling, and he was entering un-chartered territory.

Since he was no longer running the Texas booking office for the NWA, he decided to call his new promotion World Class. Up until that point, World Class Championship Wrestling was simply the name of one of his TV shows – equivalent to what RAW is for the WWE today. Since the 1960's, the actual promotion name had been Southwest Sports, but now, once he broke away from the NWA, what originally started as one of his TV shows became the name of his promotion. I know that in the interest of ease and simplicity, wrestling magazines would refer to the Texas territory as World Class during the early 80's, but they were technically wrong. It's also incorrect to refer to World Class Championship Wrestling prior to 1981 – because it never even existed in the 1970's. I really can't blame people from doing it, though, and it's a testament to the huge popularity of the World Class Championship Wrestling program, but the fact is that World Class was not a promotion prior to 1986, and it's actually incorrect to refer to it as such. And if you need hard proof, simply watch one of the KTVT Saturday night shows prior to 1986, and you'll notice that the words "World Class" were never even uttered.

Then, in March of 1986 – just one month after Fritz withdrew from the NWA – his booker Ken Mantell quit the company and became the booker for Bill Watt's Mid-South Wrestling. It was a shocking defection, because when he left, he took Kamala, John Tatum, Missy Hyatt, The Missing Link, Jack Victory, Sunshine, Bill Irwin, Solomon Grundy, and Iceman King Parsons with him. He literally depleted World Class of its talent pool. For bookers, the kiss of death is to leave a territory and take a lot of talent with you. Not only does it show that you are not to be trusted, but if you had no problem burning your bridge with your previous boss – what makes the man who is hiring you think you wouldn't eventually screw him over, as well?

Buddy Rogers was infamous for doing that. He took the book in Columbus, Ohio for promoter Al Haft in the late 1950's and brought his crew in – which consisted of Johnny Valentine, Arnold Skaaland, Billy Darnell, Johnny Barend, and Magnificent Maurice. They were drawing big money and blew the place sky high. However, once Buddy didn't get his way, he took all his talent and left. That garnered him a very bad reputation - and forever after, Buddy Rogers was looked at as a booker who could make a lot of money and had good talent

connections – but when he left, he took his boys with him. I learned that lesson back then, and was also told by Mark Lewin early on that a good booker doesn't take their whole crew with them when they leave a territory.

As soon as Ken split from Texas, I got a call from David Manning, who had been Ken Mantell's assistant. He asked me if I would consider returning to World Class because their talent pool had been so severely depleted. Without hesitation, I agreed to come back. Now, if you're wondering why I would return to World Class after it suffered the life-threatening double whammy I just detailed, I have two solid reasons: First of all, Dallas was my home, and I could work there and be home at night with my family. Secondly, and more importantly, it was clear to me that Bill Watts and Ken Mantell had gotten in bed together with ambitions of overtaking Texas, and I resented that they were looking to destroy a territory that I helped build.

By late 1985, Bill Watts was looking to expand his company, and since he already had Houston locked up in a deal with Paul Boesch, he figured the next move would be to secure all of Texas. At the same time, because Fritz wasn't the easiest guy in the world to work for, Ken Mantell was constantly under a barrage of criticism. Bill Watts was smart enough to see the divide between the two of them, step in, and take advantage of it. He convinced Ken that if he helped sabotage Fritz's wrestling company, he would make room for him in his promotion and cut him in on the action.

Ken must have been harboring a lot of resentment towards Fritz to have gotten in bed with Bill like that. I know that Ken felt he wasn't being financially taken care of by Fritz. I also know he was never paid as well as I was, because in addition to my weekly booking salary, I got a percent of the towns over the average, and I also got paid for being "Gary Hart the manager." Ken never got my deal with the averages, but even if he did, he wouldn't have made that much money, because I had gotten the averages so high by 1983 that it could only go down. He also didn't have an on-air role in any capacity, so he was really just making his weekly booking salary – whatever that was. If Ken felt justified leaving in the reckless manner he did because he was resentful over the deal he made with Fritz – then I cannot sympathize with him. I never took a job I couldn't live with, and Ken should have made sure that his financial deal with Fritz was satisfactory going in. However, because Ken had never booked a territory before he got the book in Texas, he really didn't know what to ask for. In any event, after listening to Ken's constant crying and whining about the deal that he had made for himself, Bill realized how easy it would be to get Ken to jump ship. The sad thing is that Fritz truly thought Ken was his friend – and really trusted him.

Once Bill and Ken made their deal, since Ken was Fritz's booker and Bill was Fritz's supposed friend, they "independently" began encouraging him to leave the NWA by stroking his ego – telling him he didn't need the NWA. They played Fritz like a fiddle and took advantage of his animosity over the fact that the NWA board wouldn't give Kerry the NWA Title back, and used that to get Fritz to break away from the NWA. That was all a part of their grand scheme – and believe me, Bill and Ken were big-time schemers. They wanted Fritz to be independent of the NWA – just like Bill was – before they made their move, because they knew that as soon as Fritz left the NWA it would put him on an island by himself, where he would lose the opportunity to get help from the other offices when they made their move. After getting Fritz to

secede from the NWA, the next piece of the puzzle was for Ken to leave with as much of Fritz's talent as he could get to go with him.

And if you think what I'm saying sounds like some wacky conspiracy theory, you also need to realize that Bill Watts had quietly opened up a set of offices in Dallas, aligned himself with a Dallas-based syndicator and a multimillionaire backer who owned some of the biggest hotels in Texas, changed the name of his company from the regional sounding Mid-South Wrestling to The Universal Wrestling Federation, began doing television tapings in Fort Worth, and started running shows in Dallas. Now, if all of that doesn't add up to a blueprint for Bill and Ken plotting to overtake and control Texas, then I don't know what would. Fritz was truly blindsided by what they were doing, so if I could help World Class by returning, I was more than happy to do it.

When I arrived in World Class, I could see that business was really bad. The territory appeared to be plunging into obscurity, and the only worthwhile talent was Bruiser Brody, Abdullah the Butcher, Rick Rude, and Kevin and Kerry Von Erich. I had been away for a year-and-a-half, so the fans were excited to see me again. I was an established name by that time, and since the fans knew that I only managed top-flight wrestlers, they knew that good talent was on the way.

After the promotion was dubbed World Class, Fritz anointed Rick Rude to be the first World Class World Champion. Unfortunately, as I expected, the fans never really accepted him or took him seriously, because they felt that Ric Flair was the real World Champion. And how couldn't they? Ric was showing up on TBS every week and appearing on the cover of every wrestling magazine with his NWA belt. It's too bad, because Rick was a very nice kid, and he had way too much talent to be put in a no-win situation like that. Eventually, the frustration got to Rick, and when he told me he got an offer from Jimmy Crockett, I encouraged him to take it, knowing he would do great.

Fritz's first mistake was leaving the NWA, but his second one was when he promoted David Manning to the position of booker. I had originally hired David as a referee back when I had the book. Then, after I left, he became Ken Mantell's assistant. After Ken left, he was basically just thrown into the booking job. Some of David's suggestions and ideas were very good, but he wasn't able to look at things and see them for what they were, because he hadn't been around long enough to see a lot of different scenarios. A good booker who has been around will innately know what will and what won't work. You may take a chance on something against your better judgment, but unless you have the experience of a lifetime in wrestling, it's very hard to set direction for a company. David Manning did not have that experience, but since he was a workaholic, he was the guy that Fritz picked to do the job. A booking job is a lot more than meets the eye, though. Anyone can go to the dressing room and give out finishes or see the obvious – but that doesn't mean they can run a wrestling company.

David was clearly in over his head, and didn't even have control over the dressing room, let alone the direction of the company. For example, Kevin Von Erich and Buzz Sawyer had a feud that was heating up - both inside the ring and out. During their matches, they never came to blows, but their matches were very stiff. This went on and on until things got so bad that Kevin

decided it needed to be settled through fisticuffs. Kevin wrote Buzz a letter offering to fight him, even giving him the location where to meet him. Buzz actually showed me the letter. This had gone too far, but fortunately, before it got out of hand, both of them felt it was best to just back off.

Then, Blackjack Mulligan came into the territory. Rick Hazzard, the referee, was speaking rudely to Blackjack, and Jack is not the type of guy who lets anyone disrespect him. I warned Rick to leave Jack alone, but he kept pestering him about something. It eventually got to a point where Jack roughed up Rick a bit, shoved him in a locker, and left him there for awhile. Those two examples are so clear that even Ray Charles would have seen that World Class had no one leading the charge.

After five months, Fritz finally realized that he had erred in making David Manning the booker, and in August, 1986, brought George Scott in to replace him. George was a quality big name booker, who had great success in the Carolinas and the WWF. I was glad to see George, because at least he knew about wrestling, had an idea about direction, and had been a successful booker. George was the quintessential office guy. When he arrived, he had his rules and regulations, and expected us to adhere to what he thought the way things were supposed to be. I never had any problems with him, because I always respected him. I respect people that had success as bookers, because I know how hard it is. Plus, to be successful for a long period of time like George was - and be successful in more than one place - demanded that I respect him. I looked at George Scott as an equal, and as someone who was more than capable of running World Class.

Unfortunately, his tenure was marred by behind-the-scenes drama and office politics. World Class had run a show in the Caribbean, and on the flight back to Dallas, Chris Adams got inebriated and wanted more drinks. When the stewardess refused, Chris cursed her out. At that point, the second officer of the plane came out to the aisle and read Chris the riot act. Chris then grabbed him by the lapels and head butted him - closing up his eyes and breaking his nose. This was the second officer of the airplane, so effectively, it was a plane 35,000 feet over the Atlantic ocean, and if something happened to the Captain, there was nobody else there to fly it. Kevin and Kerry Von Erich and Tim Brooks had to wrestle Chris down until he passed out, and when the plane landed in Dallas, federal marshals came on board and arrested him.

The company knew that this was a huge issue, because it wasn't an isolated incident. Chris had a serious problem, because whenever he drank too much he became violent. Real violent. So when it came time for the trial, Fritz and Kevin wouldn't testify on Chris's behalf. Fritz felt that Chris had acted irresponsibly, and that he brought shame to World Class. In addition to that, Fritz was someone who really didn't want to get involved in anything scandalous - God knows he was surrounded by enough. All he wanted to do was protect the Von Erich name, because he had spent his lifetime building it, and I don't blame him for that. In Chris's mind, he felt that the Von Erich's owed him loyalty - not only out their friendship, but because of how long he had worked for them. Chris brought his problems on himself, though. What he did that day on the plane was way out of line, and Chris was wrong. Due to that incident, he spent over a year in federal prison. I used to write him and call him whenever I could, and tried to be as good a friend to him as he had always been to me. I considered Chris

one of my boys, and since I made a lot of money with him over the years, I sent him money every month out of my own pocket. I'm happy to say that he held up very well in prison. Chris was a tough Englishman who could survive in any atmosphere.

When he came out, he was clean of any drugs. His stay in prison was like a forced rehab – he didn't have access to alcohol or medication of any kind, and he sobered up cold turkey. He really looked fabulous, but shortly after, his demons brought him back to his old habits. What made things even more troubling is that Chris was our World Champion at the time of the airplane incident, so when he went to prison, George Scott anointed Black Bart as his replacement. That was one of George's moments of shame. Don't get me wrong, there's nothing the matter with Black Bart, but he was a middle of the card, get someone ready, tag team partner - not World Champion material. We're talking about someone to be the same image of Ric Flair, Harley Race, and Kerry Von Erich. Black Bart was not in that ballpark. The choosing of Black Bart as our World Champion raised a lot of eyebrows – including mine, but it was another move of George's that really led me to believe that he had lost a step over the years. When Bam Bam Bigelow arrived in World Class, he was a bump-taking, decent worker who had flames tattooed on his head. Perhaps more importantly, though, he had just gotten written up in Sports Illustrated – and was pretty high-profile at the time of his arrival.

So what did George Scott do when Bam Bam arrived in World Class to capitalize on that great, free publicity? He changed his name to Crusher Yurkov and made him a Russian! George just couldn't get away from the past in his thinking. He had come from the WWF where Nikolai Volkoff was a big heel, and the Mid-Atlantic area, where Ivan Koloff was the menacing, evil bad guy. That was George's mentality – that a Russian is better than a "character." And trust me - the fact that Terry Gordy's nickname was "Bam Bam" had absolutely nothing to do with George's decision. First of all, Terry was working for Bill Watts at the time, and even if he was with World Class - it would have been a plus. George could have promoted the "Battle of the Bam Bams!" You would have to be a fool not to see that!

Then, George brought Ricky Steamboat – who was wrestling fulltime for the WWF - into World Class for just one match at the Cottonbowl. I thought that was very strange, because he promoted Ricky like everyone would know who he was – but the World Class fans didn't have any idea who he was. Yes, Ricky was on the USA Network, but this was before cable was dominant, and George didn't understand that unless you were a Von Erich or a Bruiser Brody, you weren't considered big-time in World Class unless you came in and built up a following in Texas. George brought Ricky in with absolutely no build up, and by doing it that way it was a disservice to everyone – especially Ricky. Now, had he brought Ricky into World Class and given him a few wins on TV, Ricky really would have caught on with the fans, and it would have been a great thing. George knew who Ricky Steamboat was and how great he was – but the World Class fans didn't know that, and they needed to be educated. To top it off - Ricky was a great worker, yet for his big appearance George booked him against The Mighty Zulu – who couldn't work a lick.

Those particular booking decisions had a lot of people in the company questioning George's mindset, and gave credence to the rumors that were circulating about him at the time: That he had a different agenda than he was leading Fritz to believe. Word on the street was that

George Scott was sent in by Jimmy Crockett or Vince McMahon to sabotage World Class. I'm sure they saw Texas as a big cherry that they would love to have, because it's right in the middle of the country and has nine big towns. One could argue that if they did have their eyes on the Texas market, it's possible that George was sent in to scuttle and disrupt - but the suspicion wasn't on my part. I considered the rumors just dressing room politician talk, and paid them no mind. Besides, if George had that type of agenda, I know I would have picked up on it. Fritz might have taken those rumors as fact, though, and decided to let George go. So if sabotage was George's agenda, Fritz caught him real quickly, because he was only in World Class for four months.

After George Scott left, nobody – myself included - wanted the booking job, and World Class was in disarray. World Class, the television show that made the wrestling world take a look, had turned into a disastrous promotion. With nowhere else to turn, and basically by default, Fritz made Bruiser Brody the booker.

And then it got bad. And when I say bad - I mean really bad.

I want to make this very clear: I love Bruiser Brody to death, but a booker he was not. He had a list of good guys and a list of bad guys, and he put the good guys against the bad guys. Not only was Brody ill-prepared for the job, but for Fritz to believe that he was capable of handling a position like that, he had to be pissing in the wind or hoping against hope.

As soon as he started, Bruiser Brody came up with this hair-brained scheme, telling me, "I've got this guy who I'm going to dress up like a mercenary. All he needs is you to talk for him."

He was referring to a wrestler he was trying to develop named Jeep Swenson. I gave it a shot and agreed to manage him. It was a disaster. When I first walked him to the ring, he went out there and stunk up the joint. God knows I was there, standing side-by-side with him, making a fool of myself. I did it again with Nord the Barbarian, and made a fool of myself with him, too. However, I did it for Bruiser Brody. He was my buddy, and if he was standing knee deep in shit, then I was going to stand in shit with him. And if he was going to fail, then I was going to fail with him. I owed that to him.

It's hard to tell a friend of mine "No," and it's also very hard to tell a friend that he doesn't have an eye for talent. Everyone thinks they do. Look at Ric Flair. He is one of the greatest wrestlers in the world, but doesn't have a clue how to get anyone else over. It's one thing creating your own image, but to branch out and develop other guys is something that very few people have the ability to do. Thank God I was blessed with that ability. It was an innate ability, and not something I learned how to do. I had that in me from the beginning. The only thing I did was learn how to use it, structure it in a positive way, and be choosy about the people I chose to develop. I was only kidding myself when I agreed to manage Jeep Swenson.

Mike Von Erich had been wrestling for awhile. Mike was a smaller version of David, and really gave wrestling everything he had. We all loved him so much and would do anything we could to get him over - even giving him Tim Brooks' theme song, "Tuff Enuff" by The Fabulous

Thunderbirds, because he liked it so much. Over a series of matches, Mike severely injured his shoulder, and had to get an operation. When Mike got his injury, the office came up with this idea that Mike hit Tim Brooks in the jaw so hard that he threw his shoulder out. They approached me with that story to see what I thought, and I told them it was the most ridiculous thing I ever heard. They argued that it would make Mike look strong, but I pointed out that no one would believe that anyone could hit someone so hard that they can dislocate their shoulder, yet the person they hit doesn't have a broken jaw. However, that's what the office wanted, so Tim and I went out to do an interview and told the story - but nobody ever believed us and it got over like a fart in church. That whole period was just nonsense and silliness.

After Mike's operation, he came down with toxic shock syndrome, which is typically a disease that women get if they leave their tampons in too long. Apparently, sometime during his surgery, his doctor left a surgical tool in him and sewed him up. Mike got really sick, and he looked like a skeleton. He was in the hospital for a long time, and we thought that he was going to die. That's when the "Von Erich curse" term started coming up. Mike was literally just touch-and-go for a few weeks. His temperature was so high that the doctors were worried that it would affect his mental capacity if he survived. Kevin went on TV on multiple occasions and kept people updated with Mike's condition, and asked for prayer, which they got. Mike did recover and return to the ring, but he was never the same again.

Let's be honest, though - Mike had unbelievable shoes to fill. Not only those of his father, but of his brothers, as well. Mike was following four legendary Von Erich's, and it wasn't going to be an easy thing. The people liked him and accepted him, but there was no way they wouldn't compare him to his brothers. Mike received a strong push, but unfortunately, the stress of not being on the same level as the Von Erich's before him, as well getting a disease that almost took his life due to a careless doctor, affected his thinking process, and he did a lot of outlandish things. In separate incidents, he got into a car accident, attacked a doctor at the hospital, and at one point, smashed up a Volkswagen with a crowbar. That was not Mike. Mike was a sweet, nice, peaceful kid, who loved to write music and play his guitar. That was Mike. All of those violent instances were very uncharacteristic of him.

One day, I walked into Fritz's office, and he was sitting there with a note in his hand. He showed me the note, and I read it. It was from Mike. To paraphrase it, he wrote that he had brought shame to the Von Erich name due to his recent violent outbursts, and he thought it would be best if he ended it all. He also specified that he wanted to give his guitar, songbooks, and etchings to his brother, Chris, who had an artistic flair, as well. It was a goodbye letter. Actually, he left two notes - one for his parents, and one for Chris. The one that Fritz had was the one that was left for him and Doris.

We were all hoping that Mike was just begging for attention, and that what he wrote wasn't true. I left the office that day and went to San Angelo for an outdoor show that Kerry was headlining. When I got there, I went way up to the top of the stadium and stood there watching the sun go down. I couldn't stop thinking about that poor family, and how it was happening to them again. I hurt so much I felt numb. The hurt wasn't so much for Mike, because I knew he was where he wanted to be, and hopefully was in a better place, but I had to see his parents and his brothers go through another horrible tragedy. As I looked out over the horizon, it hit me. My

nephew and Kerry's brother is missing and probably dead, yet we're in San Angelo for a wrestling match. It was all so strange, and we were just operating on auto-pilot that night.

After Mike didn't show up for a couple of days, I knew it was grim, but nobody knew where he went to do the deed. Those days were really hard. Fritz was trying to be strong and Doris was falling apart. Then, I woke up one morning, and there was something about Mike on TV. The Channel 8 news team was at Lake Dallas, where there was a little cove where Mike used to play his guitar and write his poetry. He apparently went there, got into a sleeping bag, and took a bottle of Placidyls and two beers. That's what I woke up to that day: The image of Doris standing next to the ambulance as they put her son's body in there.

What a horrific sight.

That was a very bad time at World Class, but at the same time, it was just one more big heap of misery piled onto everything that had happened before. It was becoming really hard to be a World Class fan in a lot of ways. We were a family oriented promotion, and we encouraged our audience to watch us as a family, but after being turned off by the deaths and scandals, it got to a point where families stopped watching.

By losing the families, we lost the casual fans. Casual fans made up sixty percent of our audience, so that was a huge loss. The most important element for big business in wrestling is the casual fan, and once you lose them, it's tough to get them back. It was also very dangerous, because we could get by doing so-so business in our regular weekly towns, but when we would go to the big buildings - we had to do big. We couldn't afford not to draw, because it's super expensive. It cost \$25,000 to rent Texas Stadium for one night - and that's just the rent, and not the cleanup and the security forces. If we booked it and didn't draw well - we would be in big trouble. Yet, we plowed ahead and still booked Texas Stadium for the Parade of Champions in May 1987. Who in their right mind would do something like that? It made no sense.

Mike died one month before the annual Texas Stadium show, and something happened that really upset me. Fritz made it the David and Mike Von Erich Memorial show. That pissed me off. I saw the grief, but at the same time, I saw the greed. I couldn't comprehend how - with the grief that was in his heart - he had the wherewithal to make it a David and Mike Memorial to make more money off of it. This was his third son who had died, and I know it horribly affected him. I sat in his office with him and talked about it, and I also spoke with him late at night on the phone about it. I knew what great pain Mike's death caused Fritz and his whole family, but at the same time, I saw him using it as a promotional tool. Money is not the most important thing, but Fritz's greed overcame his emotion for his tremendous loss. I may be many things, but I'm not like that. I hated the idea, and I hated Fritz for doing it, too. Renaming the show didn't put one more ass in the seats - but it sure sold more pictures of Mike.

For the first Memorial show in 1984, over 32,000 fans showed up. In 1985, it dipped to 26,000, and in 1986, there was a turnout of 24,000. Now, in 1987 - just one year later - we drew less than 6,000 fans. If you think about it, though, why should anyone have come? With matches featuring Jeep Swenson and Nord the Barbarian, and a six woman mud-pit match, it had total



disaster written all over it. Bruiser Brody even booked himself in a match against me! What a weak card. It was terrible, and on that night, I was ashamed to walk to the ring.

During the show, Fritz came to me and told me he wasn't happy with Brody's job as booker. He didn't have to explain why - I could see the house. I told him, "You had to know what you were getting into when you replaced George Scott with Bruiser Brody just four months before your biggest show of the year. At least George had a concept of what it takes to be a booker and how to build for a big show. Brody doesn't have that knowledge or experience."

"I'm tired of running a non-profit organization," Fritz sighed. "Will you please help me run this place again?"

# Chapter 46: Booker

Fritz invited me to his farm outside of Tyler that week so we could talk more at length. We spent an afternoon on his veranda just talking, and he told me how bad business was. He said that KTVT was upset with the quality of the Saturday night shows, and the syndicates weren't happy with the ratings of World Class Championship Wrestling. He then told me that Dallas was my home, and if I didn't get involved and try to save World Class, I would be denying myself an opportunity to spend time with my family and always have a territory I can call home. He finished by saying, "You don't really have a choice in this matter. You're going to get the book back, so whatever deal you want is yours to make."

He was right. I was a Texan, and I wanted to see the territory thrive once again. I had invested a lot of time and energy into the promotion over the years, and it pained me to see that it had lost a lot of luster.

"If I take the job," I told him, "In addition to my salary, I want twenty-five percent ownership in the booking office, plus health benefits for myself and my family."

We made the deal that day, and I officially became the booker of World Class. One of the main reasons I took the job was because my wife was having some medical problems, and the insurance his office provided was fabulous. My wife ended up having a full hysterectomy, and I was grateful to have had the insurance, because without it, we would have had to spend \$50,000 out of our pocket. Normally, I could handle regular medical procedures - such as taking care of broken legs or toothaches - but this operation was going to be pricey, and Fritz had good insurance that covered everything.

As I was leaving his farm that night, Fritz asked me if he should let Bruiser Brody know that I was replacing him, or if I wanted to. I told Fritz that I would handle it, because I wanted to do it right, and didn't want to lose Brody.

The next morning, I walked into Bruiser's office, and he was sitting behind his desk. Buck Robley was also there, lying on the couch. Bruiser Brody had brought Buck in to be his assistant, thinking that since he had worked for Bill Watts all those years ago, he would have some great ideas. What Brody didn't realize was that Buck didn't really have any actual booking expertise, because Bill Watts and Grizzly Smith were the ones who did all the real work. When I walked in, Buck looked at me, and in an annoyed tone, barked, "What do you want?"

I just looked at him and said, "I've come here to fire you, Buck."

He nearly fell off the couch.

"We don't need your services here at World Class anymore," I continued. "You can leave now, and I'll tell Kathy to mail you your check."

"What - you're the boss now?" Buck challenged. "I haven't heard anything about this!"

“Either you can take my word for it, or you can ask Fritz or Bronko - but you’re definitely fired as of now.” I told him.

During all this, Bruiser was just looking at me with a bemused smirk on his face - like I was ribbing him - and asked, “What about me?”

I softened my tone with him, because he was my friend, and said, “Bruise, you and I will have the same deal we’ve always had when I was your booker.”

At that moment, he got a big grin on his face and bellowed, “Thank God this is over!”

For Bruiser Brody, me replacing him as booker was a breath of fresh air. Brody liked being the booker for the first week, but shortly into his tenure, he realized that the booking job consisted of more than he had dreamed of. He didn’t know that it required more than just going to the arenas at night and giving out finishes to the guys. Bruiser had never produced a TV show in his life, but now, each week, he had to go to Fort Worth and do a ninety-minute show for KTVT, then produce four one-hour shows a month for World Class Championship Wrestling. That’s ten hours of quality television programming a month - on top of booking the entire territory. When he started double booking guys, or leaving them off all week, he then had to deal with the inevitable complaints from his crew.

There’s a lot more to booking than what most people think. There are promoters and TV stations that need to be contacted, there are salaries to be monitored, and you have to remember who beat who, when they beat them, where they beat them, and how they beat them. If you don’t remember simple things like that, you can take a good mid-card guy, have him do one too many jobs, and before you know it - he’s nothing but a jobber in the fans eyes. You’ve got to pay attention or you can get in a lot trouble real quick. Booking jobs in big offices like Texas, the Carolinas, Georgia, New York, or Florida were major jobs, and you had to know what you were doing. That’s why I was fortunate that I had Jim Barnett and Bill Watts to teach me. Plus, I had good assistants. Meanwhile - Brody had Buck Robley.

Buck was really upset about being let go. I had no problems with him personally, but he was going to be of no help to me in the office. Why should I pay him \$75 a night to do nothing but hang out in the dressing room and criticize my TV shows? Thankfully, my replacing Bruiser never caused any animosity between us, because he understood he was in over his head. I don’t mean this in a bad way, because God knows I love Bruiser Brody – and that he made me a lot of money - but Bruiser was a great piece of in-ring talent, and that’s as far as it went. \_

The booking job in Texas had gone full circle. After I first got it in June of 1976, the job went to Ken Mantell in 1983, David Manning and George Scott in 1986, and Bruiser Brody in early 1987. Then, in June of that year - exactly eleven years to the month after I first got it – the book finally came back to me. During the four years that I wasn’t booker, Ken Mantell and the others had bastardized what I had spent seven years of my life building and protecting - and it showed. Fritz needed someone to restore the once prestigious and golden name of World Class,

and he felt I was his last hope. I knew that I had a lot of work to do and a big job ahead of me, so I immediately got to work at rebuilding World Class.

As soon as I took over the reins as the booker, my first edict was to clean up the dressing room. People say that Ken Mantell was a very creative and inventive booker, but I would like someone to tell me what he created other than chaos and disruption. I'll say this point blank - Ken Mantell was the one who allowed the drug situation in World Class to get as bad as it got. Everyone loves to talk about how "drug oriented" World Class was - but it was never that way under my watch. Under Ken Mantell's watch is when it really took off. When I first left in January of 1983, after seven years as the booker, there were no incidents of drugs, arrests, or deaths in Texas. In the year that I was gone - everything changed, and when I came back in 1984, the place was crazy with drugs. Guys would show up high and drunk - and were still allowed to wrestle. That's because Ken Mantell didn't have the balls to stand up to the guys, and he allowed the drug abuse to continue out of fear of losing his job. I am truly disgusted at what he did to World Class.

I know that I have been somewhat overbearing about Ken's inadequacies thus far, and if after reading this book you feel that I come off as bitter, so be it. That is your prerogative. However, the only reason I am spelling everything out for you in regards to Ken Mantell is because I truly feel that he destroyed World Class - and I want you to fully understand why I feel that way.

The first thing I did was institute a drug policy, making it clear to everyone and anyone that if they showed up high on my watch, I would send them home - and nobody knew the signs better than me. If anyone on my crew didn't have enough respect for the business or for their opponent to show up straight for their match, then I wouldn't send them out to the ring. I also made it clear that if any of their names got in the newspapers, TV, or radio for anything illegal, I would fire them. I was running a family friendly wrestling promotion with religious overtones. I knew what I was involved with and knew what I was doing, and could not tolerate scandal of any kind. Even the Von Erich boys knew that if Uncle Gary saw them messed up - even if it was from prescription medication - they were in a lot of trouble.

So did my drug policy work? Well, think about it this way: No World Class wrestler ever died on my watch - and I booked that territory longer than anyone else. While Uncle Gary was the booker there was never even a hint of death, arrest, bad publicity, negativity, or scandal associated with World Class. And why do you think that was? Because Ken Mantell was the one who allowed drugs in the dressing room - not me.

It would be very easy for someone to suggest that I should have just come in and cleaned house, firing anyone with a drug problem. How would that have helped them? To shut someone out of your life is not the way. I don't know when you give up on a friend - but I wasn't going to give up on them. Maybe in some ways I was an enabler by keeping them on the payroll, but as far as casting them away? No, I never did that. A couple of times Kerry showed up high, and when he did, I sent him home. I had other guys that showed up like that, and I sent them home, as well. No one was immune. I even talked to the guys who had problems one-on-one - but this time as their boss. I would tell them, "These drugs will mess up your life."

Trying to get through to an addict can be very frustrating, because it's, "Yes, you're right! I'm going to quit! Tomorrow is a new day!"

Then, I would hear that they went out and got wasted again. I spent time with all of them talking about the problems they would get into if they continued the way they were going - but there was seemingly nothing I could do for them, because no matter what I tried, nothing worked. They had to want to not be addicts.

Because I smoked marijuana on a regular basis, it was very hard for me to talk to the guys about serious drug problems. In their mind, I was the druggie, and I didn't have a leg to stand on. That wasn't a good thing, and I knew that, but I didn't want to be a hypocrite and lie about what I did. Perhaps I should have denied it, but I wasn't that kind of guy, and I couldn't do that. Unfortunately, what I did gave them an opportunity to say, "Hey, the booker smokes marijuana."

Was there another booker of my era who was known for smoking pot? Did the reputation of Ole Anderson, Pat Patterson, Dusty Rhodes, George Scott, or Bill Watts as "pot heads" precede them the way it did Gary Hart? No way. Out of all of my peers - I was the black sheep of the bunch. The fact that I smoked pot gave Fritz an easy out whenever I would bring up my concerns about the drug use in World Class, because he could deflect anything I said by using me as some sort of scapegoat - as if my pot smoking was the root cause of all the problems. Fritz would go on and on about what a bad image I set because I smoked marijuana - yet he had no problem calling the chemist to get his boys something so they could work or sleep.

I've done an assortment of drugs in my life. There were a few years where I ate hashish and did acid, but I never got into coke, speed, crank, crack, or any synthetic drug. My only real vice is marijuana, although I've never been what anyone would consider a "drugged-out stoner." After the shows, I would simply go back to my room or my home, smoke a number, listen to some music, and read a book. That's how I wound down. And if I didn't have that, maybe I wouldn't have been as successful as I was.

I know a lot of people look at pot as drugs - but I don't. I see it as something that God put here for us. There's a big difference between an herb and a chemically-derived synthetic substance that kills people. This is not a defense, but I could smoke a marijuana cigarette thirty years ago and get buzzed, and smoke the same marijuana cigarette today and get just as buzzed. With pills, over a period of time, you have to take more and more to get the same affect. And I'm not trying to have it both ways. There's a huge difference between an addiction to hard drugs and casual pot smoking - because nobody ever died from a pot overdose. It's apples and oranges. With that said - I want to make it clear that by no means am I recommending or endorsing marijuana for anyone else. I'm merely explaining my personal point of view.

I would also like to add that if I were a better role model for my crew, then maybe I could have gotten them to clean up their act. I do take responsibility. Maybe if I didn't smoke marijuana, I could have been better at counseling them and making them understand that what they were doing was not good for them. Perhaps someone better educated or more assertive

could have done more, but I couldn't. It was a messed up time, and I handled it the best way I could.

One of my big initiatives was to improve the talent situation in World Class. I inherited "Mr. USA" Tony Atlas, who George Scott had brought in, and since he was a big-name in the industry, I kept him on the roster. Tony Falk was also there with a Boy George gimmick, wrestling as Boy Tony. Whoever came up with that I don't know - but I pray to God it wasn't George Scott. That kind of character wasn't something I wanted in World Class. It was too risqué, and since I don't think that demeaning homosexuals is a good thing to do I changed his character to "Cowboy" Tony Falk.

I also had The Fantastics – Tommy Rogers and Bobby Fulton - on my crew. I really liked those two guys, especially Tommy. He's actually Buzz Sawyer's half-brother – although not too many people know that. Over the period of a couple of weeks, I noticed that during their matches, they would take turns getting beat up. One night, Tommy would get pounded on and Bobby would make the comeback, and then the next night Bobby would sell and Tommy would make the big save. I pulled them aside one night and told them they cannot do their matches that way, stressing, "I can't have that. It's too obvious what you're doing."

They told me that was the way they did business, and continued doing their matches that way. So I simply quit playing their theme song - ZZ Top's "Sharp Dressed Man" - every night. About four days later they asked why I wasn't playing their entrance music, and I said, "I figured I would play your song one night, and then the next night I won't play it."

They got the message. All in all, though, The Fantastics had a great act, the kids loved them, and I always found them to be a credit to the card.

There was a young wrestler I met during my travels in Puerto Rico named Al Perez. Al and I became good buddies and hung out at the pool because Abdullah was always in the casino gambling, and I'm not a gambler. When I became the booker, I contacted Al and brought him into World Class, where I managed him. Al Perez was magnificent. He was the most gifted athlete of anyone I ever managed, and was trained by Karl Gotch - a real hooker and shooter. Al knew how to wrestle, was in fabulous condition, and was the most gorgeous creature that ever stepped into a wrestling ring. We had to beat the women off with a stick. Even though the women loved him, he made a great heel, because he had a mean, vicious streak in him. He was the sweetest guy in the world - unless you flipped his switch. That came across in his work, and the people knew that he was a bad dude. When he became the World Class Champion, people believed it. He carried the belt well and made an excellent champion. Perhaps more importantly, though, was that he never got into the drug scene. He didn't even smoke. He might have a beer occasionally, but he took no steroids at all. He was completely and absolutely drug free.

I also brought Don Jardine – as The Spoiler - back. Don and I got together in 1967 and remained together off and on for over twenty years. Aside from being a great friend of mine, he is also Godfather to my children, so there is a strong sense of loyalty there. Fritz was really annoyed when I brought The Spoiler in, though, groaning, "Don Jardine is an old guy! What are you bringing him back for?"

“As long as I’m here, he’s here,” I told Fritz. “He did as much to make you a successful promoter as I did.”

I truly believe that. Don and I should have more credit than anyone else for making Fritz Von Erich a successful promoter. When I said that to him, Fritz stormed out of my office, but two days later he came back saying, “Thanks for being Gary. You’re the only one who doesn’t kiss my ass.”

Granted, by 1987, Don wasn’t The Spoiler of old, and he couldn’t walk the ropes anymore, but he was a Texas legend and deserved to be on the roster. I brought other established names in like Terry Taylor and The Iron Sheik to add some star power to the cards. A couple of the new, young faces I recruited were Ted Arcidi and Eric Embry. Not only did Eric put asses in the seats, but he was also very good in the office, helping out with the daily chores. Plus, when I would be away from home, Eric would baby-sit my kids, because my wife was in the hospital during this time. Eric was so good in the ring that I even instituted a Light Heavyweight Title for him to defend.

There was a young wrestler in the area named Mark Calloway who was looking to get a break. He was a big kid, and I gave him as many dates as I could, because he was just starting out. Mark had great potential, though, and later went to the WWF as The Undertaker. The Spoiler was one of Mark’s idols. What you see in The Undertaker is a glimpse of what The Spoiler was. Of course, Don had a different style than Mark Calloway, but that was the image: A big, agile guy that could walk on the ropes and use the ropes for phenomenal things. In his day, The Spoiler could step on the center rope, jump backwards, make a full turn in the air and drop a knee across his opponent’s throat. He was unbelievable.

Some other talent I brought in was Steve and Shaun Simpson from South Africa. The Simpson boys were marvelous children, and they looked like the heavy metal hair bands of the time. The Simpson brothers became a very important part of my crew, and like Al Perez, they were totally drug free – and that included aspirins. Unfortunately, in one of his matches, Steve went diving into the turnbuckle head first and detached his retina. I don’t know if he lost total sight, but it was very serious. Their father, Sam Cohen, had a wrestling company of his own in South Africa, and he eventually contacted me looking to get some talent. I talked to Mark Calloway, and he told me he would be interested in going, so I made a deal with Sam that I thought was fair: \$700 a week for three months. Sam balked, and wanted to pay \$300 a week. I fought to get Mark more money, and we finally settled for \$600. Mark felt he should have gotten a lot more, but that’s all I could get him. A few days later, Brad and Bart Batten told me that they had made a deal with Sam and were going to South Africa. I asked what they were being paid, and they said \$300 a week. Sam came to me, gloating, “You said I couldn’t get any guys for \$300!”

I just rolled my eyes and said, “Well, you won’t get any guys from me at that price!”

The World Class roster was really shaping up, and even though the Von Erich's, The Spoiler, Tim Brooks, Bruiser Brody, and Abdullah the Butcher had been in Texas for years, I truly feel that I brought in some new, good, young faces who the fans really took to.



## Chapter 47: The Warrior

Another young wrestler I was helping to develop was The Dingo Warrior. In the summer of 1986, I was looking to create a tag team. I wanted to have two guys who looked like they came from the Bowery in New York City, and name them Dingo and Socko – simply because I thought they were unusual names that the fans might notice out of curiosity. When Jim Hellwig came into Texas, I watched him wrestle, and though he was very green, felt he would be perfect for the role of Dingo. I talked to him after his match, and he told me he went to college in Marietta, Georgia and got a degree in chiropractic medicine, but found that he preferred bodybuilding and wrestling. He even laid me on a table and gave me a decent chiropractic adjustment. He told me that Red Bastien had trained him how to wrestle, so I asked him if he was looking for someone who would help get him to the next level, and he said he was. That night we made a deal for him to become Dingo, and for me to become his manager.

I suggested that he come down to the Sportatorium, where I could get Tim Brooks to really teach him the fundamentals of wrestling, but Jim made it very clear to me that he wasn't interested in that. All he wanted me to do was to help him become a big name wrestler - because he wasn't interested in becoming the greatest wrestler on the card. He also felt that training at the Sportatorium would interfere with his workout schedule, because he worked out twice a day. When I couldn't find the right Socko, I figured that since Kerry was The Modern Day Warrior, and The One Man Gang did a good job as The Halsted Street Warrior, Jim should be named The Dingo Warrior. The first night I went to the ring with him, I walked behind him so I could get a better perspective of the people's reaction to him - and I could watch the fans watch him. On the way to the ring, women were reaching out and hugging him, and I knew I had a winner. He had so much charisma, that even though his in-ring work was very green, the people forgave him for that. They simply didn't care.

I spent a lot of time helping him build his career, and I did it by watching his matches and making suggestions to him. The things he did well I encouraged him to keep doing, and the things that the people didn't pick up on I advised him to drop. That was my process with Jim. He had great potential, and I was simply molding him so that he wouldn't do anything that made him look bad. A couple of things were clear right off the bat. When he lifted his opponent over his head – the crowd would pop, and when he clothes-lined a guy – the crowd would pop again. However, those were the only two things he knew how to do, so I had to figure out other things for him. That's when I came up with the shaking of the ropes. If you watch the tapes of him and me, he would do something in the ring, then come over and talk to me, then go do something else, and come back to me again. What I was doing was saying, "Throw him to the ropes and catch him in a bear hug," "Body slam him," and things like that. That was par for the course, though. Then, one day, just to change it up, I instructed him, "Before you come back, shake the ropes, scream, and pound on your chest."

I was thinking Tarzan. That's exactly what I was thinking in my mind, and he began to develop that image. Because he was so limited by his in-ring performance, I put him in a tag team with Matt Borne so he could have longer matches. By being part of a team, Jim could let

Matt do most of the work, and come in for just a bit and take over. Basically, I structured his matches to fit his ability at that time.

Even though I was managing The Dingo Warrior, it was obvious that no matter what we did, the people refused to dislike him. Therefore, The Dingo Warrior could never really be considered a heel - because the fans refused to see him in that light. He was a beautiful, magnificent specimen that they adored. That was fine by me, and I managed and developed him until he was ready and the time was right – and then Abdullah the Butcher and I turned on him – making him a huge babyface and feuding with him for quite a while.

Clips of World Class Championship Wrestling were replayed on TV-Tokyo in Japan, and one evening, Antonio Inoki saw The Dingo Warrior on TV and felt he would really get over in his New Japan promotion. Someone from his office got in touch with me, wanting to know if I could send them Kevin Von Erich, The Dingo Warrior, and Scott Hall for a tour of Japan. I told them that I didn't book Scott Hall, but I made a deal to send Kevin and The Warrior to Japan for big money. As soon as I made that deal, Pat Patterson called me, telling me that he had just signed The Dingo Warrior to a deal with the WWF. I was very happy for Jim, because I knew that the WWF would be far better for him than World Class could, because in World Class, to have longevity, you had to be a good worker. No disrespect to Jim, but he was never what I would call a smooth, polished worker. He was simply a superhero come to life. When Pat told me of the deal, I explained the situation I was in, saying, "I just made arrangements for The Warrior to go to New Japan for Antonio Inoki. Can he do that first?"

"No, we want him in the WWF as soon as possible," Pat replied. "We don't want him in any kind of contact with Inoki."

Pat realized that The Warrior had fantastic charisma and incredible potential, and didn't want him working for anyone outside of the WWF. My hands were tied, so I said, "He's yours. I hope you do wonderful things with him and that you all get rich."

Needless to say - my wish came true! Jim went to the WWF and became one of the hottest guys there, and I'm very proud of him for accomplishing so much in such a short period of time. He did his gimmick very well and he drew a lot of money being who he was, because in the WWF, the fans didn't care about his work rate – all they cared about was the adrenaline rush they got when they saw him wrestle. I know that in the end, there were some hostilities between Jim and the WWF, but I personally can't say anything derogatory about him, because I never saw that side of him. When The Warrior was with me, he was just a sweet guy who wanted to learn how to get over and stay over.

Anyhow, at the time that The Dingo Warrior left World Class, I had him as the Texas Heavyweight Champion. Since Pat wanted him in the WWF as soon as possible, I asked Jim if it was okay if we said Al Perez beat him for the belt in Puerto Rico. Jim was kind enough to okay that phantom title change – and personally dropped the belt off at my office. As an interesting side note – by Pat signing The Warrior and calling me when he did, he truly changed the course of two men's careers. It turns out that Antonio Inoki not only wanted Jim Hellwig for a tour of Japan – but he also wanted him for a new character he was creating named Big Van Vader. Since

Jim had to cancel his tour of Japan, the role of Vader eventually went to Leon White – who at the time was wrestling for the AWA.

Kevin Von Erich, Scott Hall, and Rick Hazzard eventually went on that Japanese tour. Kevin and Scott went to wrestle, and I got Rick a deal to go and make some extra money as a referee. During their tour, I got a phone call late one night from someone who worked in the New Japan office. He was frantic, and the only things I could understand were, “Scott Hall” and “Kevin Von Erich.”

I kept trying to tell him that I didn’t book Scott Hall, and that he needed to call someone with the AWA. The following morning, I got another call from someone in Inoki’s office – but this person spoke English. Apparently, Kevin, Scott, and Rick had gone out for a night on the town, got drunk on some sake, and pissed on the wall of a restaurant. The Yakazu - which is the Japanese mob – happened to be there and were highly insulted, so they followed them back to their hotel, and when Scott and Kevin went off to their rooms, the Yakazu grabbed Rick Hazzard and stabbed him seventeen times. They didn’t go into any arteries, but they cut him over both his eyes and across his nose. New Japan sent him home immediately, and everyone at World Class tried to squash the story. The worst thing is, when Rick got back, Fritz blamed the whole incident on him! He said it was Rick’s fault for not keeping Kevin in line! That seemed to be Rick’s lot in World Class, though. He was the company’s whipping boy, and if something got messed up, everybody would point their finger at him.

I had a real good crew with me in the office - especially in my booking assistant, Percival Pringle. Percy was very helpful to me, because not only did he work in the office, but he also did the programs, managed, and wrestled. Percy’s a sweetheart, I love him to death, and I’m so glad he got his position as Paul Bearer with the WWF. He did extremely well there, and no one deserved it more than him. He was a great assistant for me, and a good sounding board for things, much like Sir Oliver Humperdink was to me in Florida and North Carolina.

Kathy White was the office secretary, and I’ve mentioned her name a couple of times thus far. She was from Chicago - like me - and started out with Southwest Sports in the 60’s as Fritz’s personal secretary. She was devoted to him and to wrestling. Even though Fritz came first, she always looked after me, too, and made time to take care of my business. She was a wonderful, sweet woman who knew more about the wrestling business than Fritz and I put together. She had been with the company over thirty years when she retired during my second run as the booker. She retired to a nice section of Irving with her dog and her crippled mother, and one day, two guys broke in, killed the dog, and viciously murdered Kathy in her bathtub. The police found her with her throat cut and the dog with its head bashed in. Talk about a Von Erich curse.

One night, World Class was running a show in Corpus Christi, and as I was standing in front of the building, none other than Billy Goetz walked up to me, exclaiming, “Hey kid! How ya’ doin?”

I hadn’t seen him in twenty-four years - since the day I left Chicago. We sat down, started to talk, and it was like I had just left him yesterday. He kept telling me how proud he was

of me, but he also told me that the past couple of decades had been hard on him. Billy's son went to Viet Nam and was killed, and Billy was never the same after that. He had recently moved to Corpus Christi, so I asked him if he would be interested in promoting the town. Wrestling was Billy's life, so he was thrilled with my offer because it offered him an opportunity to be back around the boys – which was where he wanted to be. I put him on salary, and he helped me book local wrestlers, look after the box office, and basically run Corpus Christi. It was such a great pleasure that I could give him back a little after all he had given me, and anytime he thanked me, I would assure him, "This is nothing compared to what you did for me."

I was very fortunate that I was in a position to do that for him. Anytime I could help a guy that had given me a hand up when I was starting out was a big thrill for me. I was honored to do that for Billy, and he did an excellent job.

We also got sports and entertainment promoter Steve Coury involved in World Class, as well. He had promoted John McEnroe's "Tennis Over America" tour, and was the late, great Stevie Ray Vaughn's concert promoter. Steve got us booked for about twenty shows on the east coast, and we called it "Von Erich's Over America." The shows were great, but Steve, like every other promoter, wanted to create a character of his own. At first he wanted to call him The Amoeba, but I gently explained to him that a gimmick like that might not get over. At the time, Coca Cola was calling itself "The Real Thing" in their advertisements, so he went out, found a local bodybuilder, and named him "The Thing." Pretty creative, huh? Bruiser Brody was booked against The Thing one night, and during their match, Brody picked up a chair and beat The Thing all over his body. It turns out, The Thing had gone into Brody's dressing room before the match and told Brody what he could and could not do to in the ring that night. Bruiser was a wonderful guy – but nobody told him what he could and could not do.

One time, Bruiser and Abby asked me to book them in a cage match. I thought it was a great idea, but I also realized that neither of them liked to lose - because it wasn't good for their gimmicks. "It's a hell of an idea, guys, but who's going to do the job?"

They told me not to worry, and that they would figure it out. I said, "Okay. It's in your hands. I'll book it - but you guys have to come up with the finish."

The night of the show, I went to the dressing room to escort Abdullah to the ring, and he and Brody were sitting there talking. I asked, "So how are we ending this tonight?"

They both looked at me dumbfounded, so I asked, "You guys haven't come up with a finish? It's time to go to the ring! The match is on right now! We're next!"

"You come up with something!" Bruiser said.

"No way," I told him. "You guys wanted to be in a cage match, so you have to come up with the finish. I'll tell you this, though - if I don't have a finish in this match, I won't book either one of you ever again!"

They begged me to get involved for the finish, but I flat out refused. After escorting Abby to the ring, I even sat in a chair in the corner for the entire match. I never did that. I usually stood and paced around the ring to add some drama – but that night they were on their own. I let them go for forty-five minutes, and the match stunk. Eventually, Bruiser Brody finally succumbed to the boredom of it all, got tired of Abby laying his 450 pounds on him, and figured that since it wasn't on TV, he might as well do the job. What a mess that was.

Being the booker meant I had to deal with everyone's problems, both in the ring and out, and in World Class there was never a dull moment. One day, Kevin Von Erich and his youngest brother Chris got into a boat accident on Lake Dallas. It wasn't a big thing, and thankfully no one was severely hurt. They were just wild and crazy Texas boys. At another point, Kevin was in a rush to go someplace, and while backing out of his garage, his car pinned his four-year-old daughter against the garage wall. It was simply one of those unfortunate instances where a child runs after her daddy – and no one knew she was there. She was roughed up, but not seriously injured. Kevin was really shaken up, though.

Then, one night we were in El Paso, and Kevin was in a match where he landed on the back of his head and knocked himself totally, absolutely goofy. When he got back to the dressing room, he was asking, "Where am I? What are we doing here?"

He knew who I was, but didn't know where we were at or what we were doing. It was a severe concussion - but it was not his first one. In fact, Kevin had seven concussions previously - because his wrestling style was all out. In retrospect, he probably should not have flown home that night, but he really wanted to see his family, and insisted he was feeling better. I was very concerned about him, though, and told him to take the next day off. However, like a good trooper, Kevin showed up the next night at the Will Rogers Auditorium - where we taped the KTVT show. The match was Kevin Von Erich, Bruiser Brody, and The Fantastics against Al Perez, Black Bart, Brian Adidas, and Al Madril. I was at ringside, and as Kevin was criss-crossing with Brian Adidas, his body began to contract. Suddenly, he turned bright red, then purple, and fell face forward on the mat.

Thank God for Bruiser Brody and Tommy Rogers. They jumped in the ring and Bruiser pounded him a couple of times on his chest, while Tommy gave Kevin mouth to mouth resuscitation. Once again, the audience was shocked. They had been through so much with David, Gino, and Mike's deaths, and now there was more emotional baggage being dropped on them. They were in hysterics, and I was standing on the floor watching this. I couldn't break character, but in the ring, one of my Von Erich boys was in serious trouble. I couldn't believe this was happening right in front of me. As I was standing there with my head racing, I noticed Mark Lowrance still doing the commentary. I ran over and yelled, "I don't want this on the air. Go to black."

Even though some of the fans saw me telling him that, that was the one and only time I didn't care that I was breaking kayfabe. Mark and Tex - the KTVT director sitting in the truck - would have been perfectly content to just sit there and tape the traumatic event until the ambulance arrived had I not instructed them to stop filming. Finally, the paramedics got there, and after tending to him, determined that he had a seizure brought on by his concussion the night

before. Fortunately, by that time, he was breathing okay, but they took him to the hospital just to be on the safe side. I then called Fritz and told him what was going on, and that Kevin would be off for a couple of weeks.

The next day, Fritz came into my office and asked me to put on my thinking cap and come up with a “reason” that Kevin collapsed. I suggested that we say he was attacked in the dressing room before the match, but Fritz didn’t like that, and wanted something bigger. We started throwing ideas around, and one of his was that Brian Adidas had hit Kevin with a Duke Keomuka-like karate move. Fritz really liked that one, and told me to run with it. I did what he wanted, but I personally felt it was weak. Sure enough, the “karate chop” story never got over with the fans at all.

There were times that I did things I felt uncomfortable with, but with that particular claim I felt really uncomfortable, because it was ridiculous and insulting to the audience. That and explaining how Mike Von Erich hurt his shoulder by hitting Tim Brooks were two of the hardest things I ever had to explain to the fans. Those, by the way, are just two examples that illustrate how - even though Fritz was a brilliant businessman - creativity simply wasn’t his forte. I’m not trying to take anything away from his success – but believe me when I tell you he was not a great manipulator.

Over the years, I’ve heard rumors that Kevin’s collapse in Fort Worth was brought about by drugs – but that is totally, completely untrue. Let me say something about Kevin: Kevin is a very strong guy, a very special guy, and a survivor. Forget about the wrestling world - there’s no one in life that has been through what he has. And today, he’s very well adjusted, copes well in life, and is doing great. That makes me very happy. One reason he’s that way is because he always put his family before all else. He has a beautiful wife and four lovely children, would do anything for them, and is a devoted husband and family man. Even though Kevin was the oldest of the Von Erich brothers, everyone talked about how David was World Champion material, and then Kerry won belt. It would appear that Kevin was overlooked - but in actuality, Kevin didn’t want the world title. He was just happy being Kevin. That was his way, and Kevin would be the only one of the boys who would come to me and say, “Uncle Gary, my knee is hurt and I would like seven days off.”

David and Kerry never asked for time off. Don’t get me wrong, though. If Kevin was asked, and told that we needed him to be champion for good of the family - he would have stepped right up.

Doris Von Erich would stop by my office every now and then. I always had photos of my top guys on my wall, and on one wall I just had the Von Erich boys. She would come in, sit with me, and we would talk about the children. Doris is as wonderful a mother as a child could have. In the early years, just like in my house, Doris was mother and father to the boys, because Fritz was out making money and making a better life for the family. She had a wonderful bond and closeness with her children. When she would get up to leave my office, she would always go over to the wall where the Von Erich boys were, put her hand on David and Mike, rub their pictures, and cry. It was so hard for me to just sit there. What could I say? It happened about

three times during my last stint as booker, but when she left my office - I was emotionally drained.

Fritz, Kevin, and Kerry came into my office one day, and we all started discussing the direction of the company. At one point, Fritz and Kevin got into a heated discussion, and Fritz suddenly stood up. Kevin jumped up, doubled up his fists, got in a fighting stance, and cried, "You're not going to hit my anymore."

At that point, Fritz looked stunned, and then yelled, "Why are you acting like that in front of this guy?"

He was referring to me. After knowing the Von Erich family for over twenty years, I was no longer "Uncle Gary." I became "this guy," simply because I saw something that Fritz didn't want me to see. I also took what happened to mean that Kevin had been hit by Fritz before. Why else would he jump up and double up his fists?

## Chapter 48: Wild West Wrestling

Back in April of 1987, Bill Watts sold his Universal Wrestling Federation to Jimmy Crockett. A lot of people were shocked by the deal – including me – but it put a slightly different perspective on what had gone down just one year earlier. If you recall, in the spring of 1986, booker Ken Mantell left the Texas booking office - along with a large number of wrestlers from Texas - and went to work for Bill Watts. While it is definitely possible that Bill and Ken had plans of overtaking Texas in order to expand and continue running the UWF, it's also possible - knowing what a clever businessman Bill Watts is – that Bill was secretly planning on selling his territory before he even made the moves on Ken Mantell. Therefore, having Texas locked up would simply have given him a better selling price when he decided to put the UWF on sale. Although I can't prove that – if you put everything in order and think about it rationally – a deal to sell a territory doesn't come on the spur of the moment, and believe me when I tell you that sale didn't just “happen” overnight.

When the sale came, Paul Boesch – who promoted Houston for Bill Watts - was so blindsided that, out of anger, he refused to go with Crockett and instead chose to do business with the WWF. That really pissed Fritz off, but it didn't overly concern me. I knew that the WWF would have to send fourteen guys into Houston every week by plane – and since it was the only stop in the entire southwest for them, their expenses would be astronomical. Don't get me wrong - I was going to keep my eyes on them, I just wasn't going to become obsessed and all-consumed with the WWF. Besides, I had bigger fish to fry with re-building World Class, and didn't have time to sit and worry about whose talent was or wasn't being promoted in Houston. In any event, Paul's relationship with the WWF went south really quick, and by September of that year, he retired from promoting altogether. Believe me, wrestling wars take a lot of you.

As blindsided as Paul was by the sale of the UWF, perhaps no one got screwed over more than Ken Mantell. When the sale was finalized, UWF wrestlers like Sting and Rick Steiner went to work for Jimmy Crockett – but Ken was of no value as a wrestler, and since Dusty Rhodes was booking for Jimmy, Ken wasn't needed, and was left standing alone, holding the proverbial bag - out in the cold. In the end, it turned out that Ken was merely a pawn in Bill's game, which makes sense, because a pawn is the only thing Ken could ever be – as he's certainly not a player. And if Ken was the genius booker that he thought he was because of the “great legacy of success” he accumulated in Texas, why didn't Jim Crockett or Vince McMahon quickly snatch him up? With nowhere else to turn, Ken began palling around with Sam Cohen, and slowly began suckering his way into Sam's wallet. If you recall, Sam had promoted wrestling in South Africa – and was a multi-millionaire. Ken somehow talked Sam into starting an independent promotion with him in Texas named Wild West Wrestling. However, since Ken had no money, Sam had to finance everything - the talent, the TV, and the buildings.

One of Wild West's biggest stars was Lance Von Erich. By Ken Mantell booking him it gave his promotion what many people thought was an “authentic Von Erich.” I immediately went on TV and announced that Lance Von Erich wasn't a Von Erich at all. Then I asked Fritz, Kevin, and Kerry to go out on interviews and admit that Lance wasn't a Von Erich. Fritz didn't want to do it because they would be contradicting themselves, but I insisted it had to be done,



and we buried Lance right then and there - returning some credibility to the Von Erich name. I'm proud to say that I outed Lance Von Erich, and I enjoyed doing it. And the fans enjoyed it, too. I know – because they told me so.

Eventually, Fritz began looking for someone to help him out with the financial end of World Class. Ken Mantell was very shrewd, because once he heard that, he encouraged Sam to meet with Fritz. During their meeting, not only did Sam offer to buy into World Class - and thus alleviate any financial strain Fritz was going through - but he also suggested they combine World Class with Wild West and “grow the company.” He painted it in such a way that Fritz accepted the offer on the spot. However, when the time came for Fritz and Sam to sign the contract, Ken had managed to talk Sam into listing him as one of the “backers,” so – according to the contract – Sam Cohen and Ken Mantell made a down payment of \$25,000 to buy into World Class.

That's how Ken Mantell - who didn't have a pot to piss in or a window to throw it out of - conned his way back into World Class. After all the drama we had been through in the past, there was Fritz, Ken, and I all back together again. And you thought politics made strange bedfellows!

I know it sounds crazy that Fritz would allow Ken anywhere near World Class after the way he left in 1986, but look at it from Fritz's point of view: He had lost three children and was at a low ebb emotionally. Before someone goes through an awful situation, they always think, “It can't happen to me.” However, once something does happen, they start thinking, “What's going to happen to me next?” That was Fritz's mindset, and he was so broken hearted by 1987 that wrestling was no longer a priority for him. Besides, Fritz wouldn't have to see Ken that much. Fritz was never at the office, and was not as hands on as you might think. Fritz also never considered Ken in his league or on his level – and he never saw him as a threat, realizing that the worst thing Ken could do to him he had already done.

When Fritz first came to me and told me that Ken Mantell was “buying” into World Class, he assured me that it wouldn't affect my position, but I knew that with Ken back – this time as an “owner” - my time was up. The sad thing is - until Ken Mantell got involved, I am positive - without a doubt in my mind - that I could have brought World Class back to prominence.

At the time that Fritz took Ken and Sam in as partners, they still had Wild West TV contracts they had to fulfill, and Fritz told me I would have to book the Wild West shows in addition to World Class. I refused, but Fritz was adamant, telling me that I had no choice in the matter because Wild West was now part of the company. Wild West had The Missing Link, Bill Irwin, Iceman King Parsons, John Tatum, and a couple of other nobodies. It was really second level talent, and now I had to produce and book their show. So I simply went home and asked Jason and Chad, “Wanna book Wild West for daddy?”

I gave my sons the names of the “talent” and they booked the Wild West cards. And I have to say - my boys were very good bookers! They had great experience, though. They had all the WWF figures and would normally book thirty shows a week in their playroom.

Even though Iceman King Parsons was considered part of Ken's crew, he gave me a heads up one day that I should be watching my back, because Ken and his crew had it "in" for me. I was appreciative that he tipped me off, but I really didn't worry about it, because I had guys like Don Jardine and Al Perez watching out for me. Besides, I had worked in horrible buildings all my life fighting with fans - and now I'm supposed to worry about a few jabroni wrestlers?

Although I never felt physically threatened, the guys on Ken's crew did try to make my job tough on me. On more than one occasion, I would tell the Wild West guys what I wanted them to do in the ring, and they would complain that "Ken wouldn't want that." I would always remind them Ken wasn't the booker - I was. Someone would then inevitably point out that Ken was an "owner," and I would shoot back, "Fritz Von Erich owns this place, and I'm the booker. You'll do what I want or you can leave."

Even though Ken was technically an owner - he was not my superior at all, and had nothing to say about the day-to-day operations in World Class. That would be like saying that Hiro Matsuda, Jack Brisco, or Buddy Colt had something to say to Dusty Rhodes when he booked Florida simply because they owned a piece of the office. The wrestling business didn't work that way. Someone could be a co-owner of a promotion, yet have no control over the day-to-day operations of the business. Ken did make one contribution to World Class, though, and that was in putting Terry Gordy and Buddy Roberts together with Iceman King Parsons and calling them The New Fabulous Freebirds. Of course, Terry, Buddy, and Michael Hayes were the original Freebirds, and you can never make an original better. The whole thing was not thought out, but Ken was desperately trying to get someone over so that he wouldn't have to worry about me and my crew. The New Fabulous Freebirds was a sham, and it was ideas like that which accelerated the death of World Class.

Another idea that Ken Mantell came up with was for Fritz to have a heart attack on our Christmas night show at the Reunion Arena. As soon as I heard that, I told Fritz and Ken that it was the worst possible thing to do. Enough tragedy already! We don't need another traumatic event in World Class, because all it's going to do is turn people off. Another Von Erich near death? Another Von Erich in the hospital? Another Von Erich may die? How redundant do we have to be? Enough was enough! I was trying to stay away from that kind of stuff, and wanted World Class Championship Wrestling to be a family show again. I knew it wasn't going to be "The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriett," but I wanted to capture that familial atmosphere one more time. I knew I would have to do violent things to draw money, but I tried to keep it so that the fans could watch our shows at home with any member of their family - and nothing would be objectionable. I was acutely aware that since David's death in 1984, all the death's and tragedies had chased away our casual fans. And as hard as I was trying to get the casual fans back, there was Ken Mantell wanting to do a heart attack angle on Christmas night no less. No matter how loud I argued, Ken won out on that one. You see - Ken had money "invested" in the company, while I was "just" the booker. Plus, Ken brushed me off by telling Fritz I was "jealous" and didn't want it to work because it was Ken's idea.

That's ridiculous, because to me, a good idea is a good idea, but playing off of a tragedy is not what I would consider "a good idea." Tragedy is always a negative, no matter how you

look at it, and you cannot take a tragedy and turn it into a positive in any manner. I know that it's hard for people to understand how Ken Mantell could get Fritz to do the heart attack angle, but Ken appealed to Fritz's ego by insisting he was the "only one who could turn the company around" by garnering sympathy for the patriarch of the Von Erich family. And deep down, Fritz thought the angle just might work.

Not only did Ken get to have his angle against my wishes, but to add insult to injury he insisted it be done just prior to Al Perez's match. Ken could have done his angle in any match he wanted - but he picked ours. I knew why Ken wanted this angle done right before Al's match. He was hoping that by beating up poor Fritz Von Erich in the ring, The New Fabulous Freebirds could take the heat from Al, become the new "bad guys," and make me and Al less important. He was doing everything he could to drive me out of World Class, and he clearly resented the fact that Al and I were in a top position. Ken Mantell went to extremes that night in trying to get The New Fabulous Freebirds over - but all he did was dredge up a bunch of old memories.

It was set up so that Fritz would accompany Kerry to the ring for his match against Al, but before the match could take place, The New Fabulous Freebirds would run in and stomp Fritz down, and then Fritz would have to be carried out on a stretcher - suffering from a heart attack. If you watch a tape of the angle, you'll see Al standing in the corner of the ring, and me standing there with my back against Al's chest. We stayed completely out of it. It was awful, and I was ashamed to be in the ring when it was taking place. All I could do was keep me and Al out of it - and I hope the fans appreciate that we conducted ourselves the way we did.

The worst thing of all was that Ken Mantell devised a scheme in which he planted five people around the territory - a couple in Fort Worth and a few in Dallas - to call the TV news stations wanting to know how Fritz was doing, hoping that they would jump on another Von Erich tragedy and rush their news cameras to the hospital. He hoped it would spark the business and make people want to pay to see The New Fabulous Freebirds get beat up - but it didn't work, and it failed miserably. Even the media knew that this was something that happened in a wrestling situation, and it was promotional rather than true. It hurt all around, and was yet another ill-advised move on Ken Mantell's part.

Dewey Robertson, aka The Missing Link, was in World Class at the time. He got in when Ken Mantell flooded my talent pool with all his shit from Wild West. The Missing Link was never a big star or a dominant figure in wrestling, and was nothing more than a mid-card guy. He was delusional about his image and his success, though, and acted as if he was in the same league as The Spoiler, Bruiser Brody, The Great Kabuki, and Dusty Rhodes - but he was only kidding himself. He was 45 when he came up with The Missing Link gimmick because he couldn't get booked anywhere, and he had been wrestling for well over twenty years prior to that! I mean - who ever heard of Dewey Robertson?

In any event, I started having a lot of problems with The Missing Link. He has since stated that our problems stemmed from me being "offended" by his lifestyle. Now, I had a lot of guys who worked for me over the years, and while I can't say I approved of the way each and every one of them conducted their personal lives, the only time I would get upset was if their various peccadilloes came into the public eye, or they brought their issues into my dressing room

and it affected business. I'll cop to that. Otherwise, I couldn't have cared less how the guys on my crew lived. Personally, I didn't like when guys were whore mongers and cheated on their wives, but I never said anything unless it was a good friend of mine and I cared about his family. Then, I would call them off to the side, sit them down, and talk to them about their lifestyle. However, I never considered The Missing Link one of "my guys," so not for one second did I ever judge him because he lived in a nudist colony. I didn't care what The Missing Link did on his own time, as long as he showed up straight, stayed out of the public eye, and did his job. The only reason he and I started having problems was because he was a complete jerk.

Everybody loves Bronko Lubitch, but I heard that The Missing Link kept messing with him. One time, I actually heard The Link tell Bronko that he should "retire," so I called Dewey over to the side to straighten him out and to make it clear that he was not to address Bronko in a disrespectful manner.

"You're not so tough," The Link sneered. "What if I punch you in the face?"

I wasn't about to be intimidated by The Missing Link, so I got right in his face and challenged, "Just try it."

Of course, he didn't make a move. At first, I couldn't understand his anger towards me. I was his booker, employer, and immediate supervisor, and there was no reason for him to resent me so vehemently. It wasn't as if I was trying to kill or harm his gimmick – even though I never cared for it. A couple of days later we were in The Sportatorium, and The Missing Link was standing next to Kerry's wife. She was a blonde, and I heard him ask her "Do your carpets match the drapes?"

I was outraged, and told him, "The next time I hear you say anything out of line to anyone, you're out of here immediately. I will not tolerate that kind of behavior in World Class."

We were standing at the top of the stairs in the Sportatorium when I said that to him, so he threatened, "What if I just throw you down these steps?"

Once again, I got in his face and said, "You don't even know who you're talking to. Don't ever think of messing with me."

I was really upset about the way he spoke to Kerry's wife, but Don Jardine tried to smooth things out, saying, "He's good guy, and just has problems."

Because of Don, I overlooked that incident. Four days later we were in Garlin, Texas, for a show, and I was in a back room going over the finishes with Ed Watt. Also in the room were Ken Mantell, Bronko Lubitch, Sam Cohen, and Shaun Simpson. The Missing Link quietly snuck into the room and – out of nowhere - attacked me on my right side. Remember - I'm blind on my right side because of the crash in Tampa. The Missing Link deliberately attacked me on my blind side because he didn't want to give me a fair chance to fight back. He really got me good, too. I fell off the chair I was on, and the next thing I knew, he was reaching over to pick me up. And as he was attacking me, Bronko was the only one yelling, "Leave him alone!"

No one else in the room seemed to care.

If you recall, ever since my days with Sam Casino in Chicago, I always carried a razor blade in my pocket. As I was on the ground and The Link was continuing his assault, I reached into my pocket, grabbed my razor blade, and started slashing The Missing Link on his face and chest. When he finally realized what I was doing to him and turned around, everyone in the room was horrified. Their mouths dropped open. Then, when he saw himself in a mirror and realized how badly he was cut up and how much he was bleeding - he lost it. He ran out the door and left the building. Ed Watt ran out in the hall, as well, screaming, "Help! We have a big problem in here!"

When Ed did that, I quickly ran to the bathroom and flushed the razor blade down the toilet. The cops came busting through the door, but The Link was long gone, and they seemed to think it was all some sort of strange angle. Nothing came of it with the police, but if they ever found out what really happened, I would have been okay, because I had been attacked. As soon as the police left, I snatched Ken and dragged him into the shower, telling him, "If I find out that you had something to do with this - and I believe you did - I'm going to open you up like a melon. You better pray that I don't find out."

I never did find out...but to this day I know in my heart that Ken was involved. Aside from the fact that Iceman Parsons had tipped me off - why didn't he, Sam, Ed, or Shaun speak up or try and help me? The only one who cared about my welfare was Bronko Lubitch. The Missing Link would never have had the balls to make the moves on me unless he had the blessings of Ken Mantell and Sam Cohen. The Link was able to be talked into attacking me because he was constantly drunk and high - upset and depressed that his career never took off - and because he loved Ken Mantell, since Ken was the only booker who ever pushed him. It's funny, because to this day The Link babbles on and on about how good Ken Mantell was, but if Ken Mantell was such a great booker, why was The Missing Link so broke that he had to live out of a truck in a nudist colony? And why was he so poor that he had to borrow money from Bronco Lubitch when he originally left the territory with Ken in the sabotage deal that didn't work out?

I truly believe I was setup that day in Garlin - but they picked on the wrong guy. After that night, I never saw Sam Cohen again. Ever. He left World Class, and his kids refused to work for me. They were afraid of me, and I can understand that. It must have been a horrifying thing for Shaun to witness. The Missing Link, meanwhile, sent his wife in later that night to pick up his stuff, and I never saw him again, either. And to show that I'm not a bad guy - at the time, The Link's son Jason was wrestling in the territory for me, and I kept him on and used him.

While I'm certainly not ashamed of what I did that day to The Missing Link - I do want you to keep this story in perspective, and remember that I was never the type of guy who walked around looking for trouble, or tried to hurt people just to get a "bad ass" reputation. However, if someone messed with me physically or laid their hands on me, I would hurt them really bad. In my thirty years in wrestling, I can count the problems I had with wrestlers on one hand, so it's not as if when I didn't get my way I had no problem cutting someone up. It's just that - even though I wasn't what you would call a traditional tough guy - if someone messed with me, they

would pay a heavy price. And for those of you who feel that I should have gotten up and fought The Missing Link “like a man” – keep in mind that I am physically half the man that The Missing Link is – plus I’m blind in my right eye. Therefore, rather than take an ass-kicking after he sucker-punched me, I took out my blade and cut him up. Yes, The Missing Link might be physically stronger than me, but when it comes to guts and brains, he couldn’t match me on his best day. Because this incident with The Missing Link was totally self defense on my part - as I never attacked him or tried to set him up in any way - I’ve never had remorse about it, because Dewey brought it on himself and deserved what I did to him. I’m glad I did it and I would do it again. The only difference is - I would cut him deeper.

By the way, I have heard that The Missing Link has recently issued a public apology to me. I don’t know why he’s apologizing to me, though. He was told to hurt to me and failed miserably – to the point of coming out of it worse for the wear. So he should actually apologize to Ken Mantell and Sam Cohen, because they were the ones who thought he could do it.

A couple of days after The Missing Link incident, John Tatum came into my office with his half-assed tough guy face and told me he would like to try me on “for size.” I was sitting there behind my desk, so I just pulled my razor out and said, “If you want to mess with me, come on - because I will cut your throat.”

He trembled and backed out of the room - because he knew I would do it.

# Chapter 49: My Final Battle with Fritz

Kerry Von Erich had been severely injured during the summer of 1986. He was riding his motorcycle at a high rate of speed and crashed into a cop car. Although he had no injuries above his waist, his ankle was crushed. He went through a long process of several operations in order to save his foot, and it was a traumatic time for all of us. He made his triumphant return to the ring later that year under the booking of George Scott, but when I watched him in the ring, it was clear to me that he came back too soon.

Eventually, Kerry had his foot amputated, and it was a big secret. I figured something was up, because during a match, he kicked me on my forearm, and it hurt a lot – as if he had a loaded boot. As time went by, my suspicions were confirmed. My wife's father was a doctor at All Saint's Hospital, and he just so happened to be friends with the therapist who was fitting Kerry for a prosthetic foot. That's how I found out that Kerry's foot was amputated – through the Texas grapevine.

Kerry was like my nephew, and I never saw his stump. He came and went with his wrestling boots on. And if Uncle Gary didn't see it - nobody saw it. Bill Apter wrote an article claiming that he saw Kerry's feet - and that it was all scarred up and still there - but Bill wrote that because he wanted to protect Kerry, and God bless him for that.

When I became the booker, I used Kerry as cautiously and as carefully as I could. I also didn't use him very much, and would always tell him to relax, because I knew that he was living under extremely difficult circumstances. Aside from the stress of just having one foot, can you imagine how painful it must have been for him? I'll never understand how he wrestled on it. The absorption rate when a wrestler hits the mat with all his amenities together hurts as it is. I couldn't imagine how it felt every time Kerry went slamming down on a foot that was no longer there. It's not an excuse - but it is some insight as to why he developed a dependency on drugs. Kerry Von Erich had such great love for wrestling, and the only way he could wrestle was to have some type of medication to let him continue to do it. One night in Fort Worth, Kerry had obviously taken some medication, and when Fritz saw him, he went crazy and called me to the side.

"I want you to fire Kerry." He said.

"Fritz, I've already told Kerry he's not working tonight, but I am not going to fire him," I asserted. "If you want him out of World Class - you do it."

We didn't fire Kerry that night, but even if we did, would that have stopped him from taking drugs? As I discussed earlier, I don't believe firing someone you love is the way to get them clean.

That particular incident weighed heavily on my mind, so a couple of days later, I approached Fritz with an idea on how to position - and perhaps save – Kerry Von Erich. I explained that if we continued down the same path we were going with Kerry, at no point would

he ever get any better. I wanted to publicly reveal the fact that Kerry had a drug problem, but explain that it was because he lost his foot. I wanted so badly for Kerry to take responsibility and overcome his drug dependency, but the only saving grace would be for us to come forward and let everyone know that Kerry had problems, and then make every effort to correct them. That way, Kerry could prove that not only could he overcome his addiction to drugs, but that just because he has one foot doesn't mean he can't be great in the ring, and that once again, The Modern Day Warrior can do it. To do this effectively, though, we had to be honest with the people about his foot so that they understood why he had a dependency. I hoped that by Kerry publicly admitting his dependency, all eyes would be on him, and he would be constantly looked at and monitored. I was hoping that something like that would keep him clean for good.

If it sounds odd that I was trying to convince Fritz about my views on how Kerry should live his life - you have to understand that Kerry was not functioning as a reasonable person. Kerry was looking for answers, and would have gone along with anything his father and I told him to do. He had so much trust in both of us that if we explained to him that this was the only way out, he wouldn't have argued, and would have gone out and admitted his addiction problem. I am confident that the people of Texas would have forgiven Kerry for all his misdeeds and misbehavior, because we all know someone - a friend or relative - who has an addiction or problem with drugs. I believe that wrestling fans are the most loyal and forgiving fans in the world, and as long as you're honest and open with them - and try to do better - they will forgive you for anything.

In America, the people that stand up and take responsibility for their actions are heralded as great human beings - because so few people do it. Most people point their fingers in all different directions. Therefore, to admit to your shortcomings is the biggest positive you can do, because you no longer allow the rumors and untruths. Look at people like Bill Clinton and Jimmy Swaggart, who have admitted to their mistakes but promised to try and do better. When someone admits they made a mistake but promises to do better, how are they anything but brave?

I also saw it as Kerry's last great hope. He would be a hero to all the handicapped people and anyone who was down trodden and never had a chance in life. He would show them that if blind children can read and go to school, then cripples can wrestle. I think they would have fallen in love with Kerry, and thrown bouquets of roses at him as he walked down the aisle. Yes, I was very stubborn with Fritz that day, and I kept persisting, but I knew that I was right. I logically laid out a scenario that would happen if we did this, and felt that I was very persuasive on my case.

Unfortunately, Fritz and I were on totally opposite ends of the spectrum on the way we wanted to present Kerry. I had my way of being straightforward and honest, and Fritz had his way - which was to protect the Von Erich name. He felt that admitting a drug problem would make Kerry look "weak," and to even suggest that Kerry was a handicap was verboten. It shows you his mindset, and that Fritz didn't have the same belief that I do: That there is forgiveness in the world. People do forgive mistakes - but Fritz didn't understand that, and that's why he kept making the same mistakes over and over. Benjamin Franklin once said that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over yet expecting different results. That was what was happening in World Class. I'm not saying Fritz didn't care about Kerry - because he did - but he



cared more about the image of Kerry Von Erich than the welfare of Kerry Von Erich. He wanted to maintain the image of the dynasty - but wasn't concerned with the reality.

Fritz had his boys doing commercial endorsements for major companies like Pizza Hut, and couldn't fathom losing deals like that. He wanted to insist that everything was wonderful and continue living in la-la land. Again - it's not that he didn't want Kerry to get help - it's that he didn't want word to get out that the rumors were true. Since I wasn't the owner of the company, I didn't have the final say on that matter, so at that point, I had nothing left to say and nothing left to do.

I really believe that I came up with the answer. I truly do. We never did it, so I can never be sure, but I have a lot of confidence in wrestling fans. If Kerry had taken my advice and called a news conference and made the statement, I believe that a lot of things could have been different. I'm not saying I could have changed the course of time or his life, but I thought it was a better way to go than denial. My way would have allowed Kerry to become the champion, and then I could limit Kerry's wrestling schedule like I did his father's before him. I could have done that, because as long as I had Kerry, I knew that I could build a dragon for him to slay. Of course, the best laid plans of mice and men...

Denial is a bigger addiction than any drug or alcohol that you put in your body. Denial caused the Von Erich family continuous problems. It's like what we learned from Himmler after World War II: The bigger the lie you tell and the more you tell it - it becomes a fact. I've read articles where people said the Von Erich's didn't come clean about Kerry's foot and drug dependency because they couldn't break kayfabe. That had nothing to do with it. Kayfabe pertained strictly to the world of wrestling, and had nothing to do with personal problems outside of wrestling. This wasn't some wrestling angle. This was real. This was Fritz's son, and no one but me stood up and screamed, "Enough is enough! Let's make this public and make Kerry accountable for his actions."

Nobody truly understands what took place in World Class during those times. There was covering up of everything - and the covering up and the denial was the biggest addiction, not the drugs. An addiction to denial. A lot of people have it and don't look at it like an addiction - but I do.

## Chapter 50: Jim Barnett to the Rescue

That's when Jim Barnett came and saved me one more time. I was in my office one Friday night getting ready for a show when Ralph Pulley, the ring announcer, popped his head in and said, "There's a guy named Jim Barnett at the back door, but security won't let him in."

I jumped out of my chair and went to the back door. I thought it was a rib, but there was Jim just standing there. I admonished the people who wouldn't let him in by yelling, "When you see a man dressed like this, you don't stop him at the door. You bring him to my office!"

The security guard started in with, "Well Ken Mantell said..."

"Forget what Ken Mantell said!" I yelled. "This is Jim Barnett!"

I took Jim into my office, and since we hadn't seen each other in quite a while we had a lot of catching up to do. I had last spoken with Jim about eight months prior, because just after losing his job with the WWF, he tried to commit suicide. As soon as I heard that, I gave him a call and we had a long talk. He was really feeling very bad about himself, and I had to remind him, "Hey! You're Jim Barnett. You're a legend in this business, and you are a survivor! You're going to be just fine!"

I was so happy to see that he was doing great, and that he was now working for Jimmy Crockett. He then surprised me by telling me that Crockett had moved his headquarters from Charlotte to Dallas – in the same offices that Bill Watts had set up - and they even had Janie Engle as their secretary! Jim then asked me about the incident with The Missing Link, and I explained how I had been set up. Then, we spoke about my deal as booker for World Class, and how I owned twenty-five percent of the booking office. Jim wasn't impressed, and told me that twenty-five percent of the World Class booking office really didn't mean anything. He then told me that Crockett Promotions was expanding, and were planning on running in Texas on a regular basis. He suggested I set up a meeting with Jimmy Crockett and Dusty Rhodes to see if there was any possibility of me working for them. I didn't think much of his suggestion at the time, and instead, just enjoyed hanging out with him during the show. We went out to eat afterwards, and then I dropped him off at the corporate suite he was staying in.

The next night, after driving back from our Saturday night show, Al Perez, Steve Harms, and I were talking in the parking lot of the Sportatorium, when Ken Mantell and Frank Dusek walked by. Steve looked at me and asked, "Gary, do you realize that your fate is in Ken Mantell's hands?"

It's funny – but with all the signs pointing in the obvious direction, it wasn't until Steve asked me that question that I knew I had to take Jim Barnett up on his suggestion to meet with Jimmy and Dusty. It's said that the choices we make can alter our destiny, but I always go with that little thing inside my chest. I've always followed the little Gary Hart inside me, and I've

never second guessed him. That little street smart boy from Halsted Street knew the difference from right and wrong - and at that very moment I knew that World Class was wrong for me. And by that time, it was obvious that there were other people interested in taking Texas. The WWF was clearly on the move, because in addition to running in Houston, they had slowly crept into west Texas, and according to Jim Barnett, Crockett Promotions had every intention of running in Texas, as well.

I didn't take my decision to leave World Class lightly, and knew that if I set up the meeting with Jimmy and Dusty it was a sure thing I was going to be hired. First of all - I was very close friends with both of them. Second of all - if they were planning on running shows in Texas, having Gary Hart on their roster would be a pretty big coup. I wasn't a Von Erich or Bruiser Brody - but I was a big name in Texas wrestling. I knew that by going to work for Jimmy Crockett I would be working opposition against the very wrestling office that I had been loyal to for so many years. I never in my whole career - ever - thought that I would work competition to Fritz in Dallas and Fort Worth. However, by 1988 I had no reservations about going in against him - because I knew that he was really losing interest in the wrestling business and not thinking clearly. Why else would he get in bed with characters like Ken Mantell and Sam Cohen?

With that said, Fritz never thought - in his wildest imaginations - that I would ever up and leave him. Even if he thought I would - he never would have thought I would work against him. Fritz felt I was secure with him because I had twenty-five percent of the World Class booking office, and the last thing he ever thought would happen was that I would align myself with any other promotion and come back in against him. He truly never would have considered it. As far as he was concerned - I was home, had the booking job, had good insurance, had a nice percentage in the booking office, and that all our problems were in the past. There is not a doubt in my mind that Fritz felt that he and I were as snug as a bug in a rug - and that World Class was where I wanted to be.

However, after Fritz refused to listen to me about Kerry, I knew I could do no more in World Class. Even though I cared a great deal about the promotion, and World Class was something very special to me, I could not stay and watch what I had worked so hard on for so many years deteriorate right in front of my eyes. After all the dysfunction with the heart attack angle, it was obvious the rest would be all downhill.

Aside from the dysfunction, I had a different source of problems than I had during my last run as booker. I didn't have a Paul Boesch, Joe Blanchard or the Kozak's - I had Ken Mantell. He was all of them rolled into one, and I really didn't feel like dealing with him anymore. I strongly believe in fate and destiny, and I am grateful that Jim Barnett visited me when he did.

The next day, I scheduled a meeting with Jimmy Crockett and Dusty Rhodes in their new Dallas office, and I brought Al Perez along with me - because I wanted him to meet them. They asked me if I was happy in World Class, and I told them I wasn't. Then they asked me about the incident with The Missing Link. I guess when something like that happens - word really gets out. They probably heard that it was far worse, or that I had provoked it, so I assured them that I was

set up, and did what I had to do to protect myself. After talking for a while, Dusty asked me point blank, "Do you want to be a part of Crockett Promotions?"

I told them both that Al and I would love to be a part of it. Once we made our decision and received a starting date from Dusty, we had to decide what to do about Al being the World Class Champion. Since only Al and I knew we were leaving, I booked a title match between Al and Kerry on TV. Without Kerry knowing, I told Al, "When the time is right in the match, and Kerry is on top of you, hold him there so he can't get up. As soon as the referee counts you down, get up, shake Kerry's hand, and raise his arm."

Al Perez lost the World Title to Kerry Von Erich on March 6, 1988, and after their match, I got into the ring and hugged Kerry. That's how my final run in World Class ended. I never gave notice, and I never looked back.

A few days later, my family boarded a train and we went to St. Louis in order to visit my brother. I thought taking a train would be a good thing, because we had never taken a train trip with the boys. From Fort Worth to St. Louis is not overly long, but it was nice enough that it was an exciting, good, fun time for the whole family. I left my wife and children with my brother for two weeks, and then flew down to Daytona Beach, where Kevin Sullivan and Sir Oliver Humperdink had a condo. They invited me down and offered to help me find a place on the beach. I fell in love with Daytona, and Kevin helped me find a first floor condo overlooking the ocean. I got it for \$500 a month - when it would usually cost \$1,500 a month. Apparently, the woman who lived in it before hung herself from the ceiling fan, and nobody wanted to rent it because of that, so the rental price plummeted. Nothing like that bothers me - although I never told my family that story!

When Al Perez and I left for the Carolinas, my two boys still weren't smart to wrestling. For a long time in World Class, I had been managing Al and Abdullah the Butcher, and when I left with just Al, Jason and Chad got mad at me. They thought I had "fired" Abdullah and "left him behind." They were angry for quite a while, until I explained that Abby was going to be in Japan. They truly adored Abdullah, and the feeling was mutual - because he was so good with my children. There could be a ton of people in the dressing room, but if I took them in and Abby was there, they would flock to him. They just loved being around him. He always had time for my sons, played cards with them, and showed them how to cheat. They also loved how he would eat his pizza after dipping it in milk. To this day they have very high regard for Abdullah the Butcher.

One night at the Reunion Arena, Abdullah and Bruiser Brody had a really bloody, violent match, and Jason and Chad were standing in the hall where the wrestlers go to their dressing room. Abby and Brody were beating each other with chairs, and Jason freaked out - because he knew and loved both of them, and thought that they were fighting for real. He was carrying on in the dressing room, and Bruiser had to come in and say, "Jason! It's okay! It's me, Bruiser!"

Jason was still shaken up, but as soon as Abdullah came in and he saw the two of them laughing together, he calmed right down. I'm sure those instances were confusing for them, though. They would see Bruiser Brody beat up their daddy in the ring at night, and wake up the

next morning to find Brody sleeping on the couch. Over time, they came to understand that wrestling was manipulated, and eventually got smart on their own, but they didn't comprehend that in World Class. When I would go into the back room with different guys to give out finishes, they would often ask me, "Dad, what are you doing when you take those guys into that little room over there?"

It's funny, because whenever I would go pick them up at school, or attend PTA meetings, all the kids thought it was super that Jason and Chad's dad was Gary Hart, but they never asked the obvious question - which is why my last name was Hart while my children's last name was Williams. Of course, as my boys got older, they had their share of fistfight with bullies because their dad the evil Gary Hart, but I taught them early on that if somebody punches them in the nose - kick 'em in the nuts. I told them that not because I was the evil Gary Hart, but just to let them know: "You are a human being and deserve to be respected. If anyone tries to - in any way - intimidate you, don't strike first, but strike back hard."

Wrestling was never discussed in my home, and my wife never for an instant tried to get involved in the business. If she ever saw me talking to anyone in the business - other than Jim Barnett, who she loved - she would walk away. Wrestling wives of my era were different, though. In my time, you didn't smarten up anyone - especially your wife. If I smartened my wife up, and she told another guy's wife what I told her, all the other wrestlers would find out, and then I would be in trouble. That's just the way it was back then. If my wife asked why I never won, I would just say "there's more money in losing." She learned over time, though, and figured it out on her own. I mean, c'mon - my wife saw me sit down for dinner with Jack and Jerry Brisco - while I was feuding with them in the Carolinas! However, she never got involved, and simply wasn't interested.

# Chapter 51: Crockett Promotions

Al and I debuted for Crockett Promotions at the Clash of the Champions in Greensboro, North Carolina in March, 1988. Immediately thereafter, Al got started in a program with Nikita Koloff at the following Clash of the Champions from Miami, Florida, and had a real good run with him. If you recall, I had managed Nikita when he was just breaking in, and four years later I found him to be the same, nice kid – this time with much more confidence in his ability. Nikita was very easy to work with, really laid back, and nothing like the character he portrayed on TV. Al and I worked with him for several months, and were married to him like The Great Kabuki was to Jimmy Valiant. That was the Crockett tradition, though: If you get something that's going good, you keep on going with it. Al and I had a great time with Nikita.

One night at the Checkerdome in St. Louis, Missouri, Dusty Rhodes instructed us that after the match, Al and I should put the boots to Nikita, and Sting would run in for the save. When Sting hit the ring that night, he tried to hit me and Al, but we just ducked the punches and dropped to the floor. After Sting and Nikita got back to the dressing room, Sting must have felt brave because Nikita was with him, because he yelled, "The next time I hit the ring you better run or I'll leave you both laying there."

Al stood up and challenged, "Why don't you try it right now?"

Sting just ignored him, so Al repeated his challenge two more times in front of the entire locker room. Sting finally responded, "Look, I don't want any trouble. Crockett might get mad at me."

It had nothing to do with Jimmy Crockett. Sting backed down because he had no balls. He was a total and complete fraud. He was nothing other than a puppet for Dusty Rhodes, and it took people like Al Perez and me to make him look great - because he couldn't look great on his best day.

Then, lo and behold, Al got programmed with Sting. I never met a more selfish guy in wrestling than Sting. He looked at everyone that he ever wrestled - with the exception of Ric Flair - as his personal job man. He had no respect for me and my accomplishments in wrestling, and he looked at Al Perez as a jabroni that only had a job because he was my buddy and I was a friend of Dusty's. He had no respect for anything or anyone, and was worse than Lord Athol Layton. He thought he was entitled to treat people like dirt because Dusty Rhodes picked him up, taught him how to paint his face, showed him a few high spots, and pushed him a mile high. On a couple of occasions, Al had to jerk Sting around in the ring to keep him in line, and Sting would go to the office and cry. He wasn't a man who would fight back - he would take it, and then go to the office and complain that Al "stretched" him and hit him "too hard." He was a complete prima donna, and didn't have the balls to fight his own fights. He would rather go squeal to the office, instead. We were in New Orleans, Louisiana at the Coliseum one evening, and as Al and I were sitting there, Dusty said to Sting, "I want Al to go over tonight. We need to get some heat on him so we can make a couple of returns."

Sting immediately started whining, "You promised me that I would never have to lose!"

Al just glared at me and said, "Gary, I need to see you outside."

We went outside, and Al fumed, "I'm going to break his legs tonight."

He wasn't kidding, so I said, "Al, please don't. Dusty is a longtime friend of mine, and we're here with his blessings. Just overlook it."

Fortunately for Sting, Al listened to me, because Al is a real tough guy - and a man's man. To give you one example - Al and Rick Steiner would constantly attack each other in the dressing room, but it was like a game to them. It was like Inspector Clouseau and Cato in those Pink Panther movies: Just keeping each other on their toes. Al did that with Kevin Von Erich in World Class, because Kevin is a real tough guy, as well. That's the kind of guy Al Perez is.

The Four Horsemen were a big deal in the Carolinas at the time, and I knew all of them very well except for Arn Anderson. I had known Ric Flair and JJ Dillon for years. Ric really helped me in establishing the Von Erich's and getting into big buildings in Texas, so I can't say enough good things about him and what he did for me. In addition to managing the Horsemen, JJ Dillon was also assisting Dusty in the office. He was perfect in dealing with the wrestlers and handling arena and television people. He was always gracious and upfront about everything with me, and all the wrestlers respected him. He's one of the nicest guys in wrestling, and I consider him a friend. I had no problems with Tully Blanchard by that time. The issues I had with his father were completely moot by that point, and it was all water under the bridge. I love Barry Windham to death. He's a second generation wrestler, and guys of my generation love second generation wrestlers - because they're part of our family. He was magnificent, and could have been a great World Champion, because he had it all. I met Arn Anderson for the first time, and really liked him a lot. It turned out that Arn used to come to the matches in Rome, Georgia, in the mid-70's and was a big mark for me, Dick Slater and Bob Orton when he was a kid. He would always remind me of things he saw me do in the arenas, and I would just laugh at the realization that one of the Four Horsemen was telling me about stuff I did when he was in high school! Individually and as a unit, The Four Horsemen were fabulous.

When it came time for us to make our first run through Texas, we did a big show in Houston, and who should be visiting backstage but Paul Boesch. When we saw each other, he gave me a big hug and said, "Welcome home, Gary. It's great to have you back in Houston."

It was joyful being back with Paul Boesch. We had made our peace when Gino passed, and being with him was like old homes week. Al was scheduled to wrestle Dusty that night, and because Dusty's mother and sister were in the audience, I got involved in the finish, and Al and I laid real close together so Dusty could cover us both for the pin. I thought Dusty deserved that for my big return to Houston!

Al Perez also participated in The Tower of Doom match at The Great American Bash in Baltimore, Maryland. That was Kevin Sullivan's idea. Jimmy Garvin's wife, Precious, was on the top of the cage with a key, and Al Perez, The Road Warriors, Steve Williams, Ronnie and

Jimmy Garvin, Mike Rotundo, Ivan Koloff, and Kevin Sullivan fought through four levels trying to get to the top of the cage and get the key she was holding. Paul Ellering and I were standing at the bottom of the pole at ringside, and as we looked up, we could see the cage swaying a foot or so back and forth because those guys were fighting on every level. It was a very exciting match.

I also managed Larry Zbyszko, who I love. Larry is the most down to earth and self-assured person you could ever hope to meet. He's a class act from start to finish, and I really adore him. Larry had a great career in wrestling long before we hooked up, and was trained by Bruno Sammartino - who Larry had the greatest respect for. Larry was married to Verne Gagne's daughter, Kathy, at the time. She was a very sweet, lovely girl, and the three of us made quite a few trips together. I put him and Al together as a team, and they participated in the third - and last - Jim Crockett Memorial Tag Team Tournament. After retiring from the ring, Larry went on to become one of the finest commentators that wrestling ever had. He offered tremendous insight to the matches, and the fans appreciated his no-nonsense commentary.

During my time with Crockett Promotions, there were seven other managers working there: Jim Cornette, JJ Dillon, Paul Ellering, Paul Heyman, Sir Oliver Humperdink, Paul Jones, and myself. A lot of the managers had problems with each other and didn't like all the competition, but I had such an ego that I knew none of them could compare with the "Playboy." First of all, there isn't a manager in the history of wrestling that developed more talent than I did. In professional wrestling, most managers were nothing more than employees of a promotion and served as a mouthpiece for the wrestler they were paired with by the promoter. Very few went to the lengths I went to in developing talent behind the scenes. And when it came time to being in front of the fans and the camera - I got my business taken care of with my performance, my interviews, and my ideas. Dusty could have put me on first every night and I wouldn't have cared, because I would make every other manager on the card that followed me pale in comparison. Because there were so many managers, at one point Dusty booked a series of Manager Battle Royals. I was 46 years old, had survived a plane crash, and spent years fighting the Von Erich's, Bruiser Brody, and Dusty Rhodes. All of that left me in no physical shape to take bumps, so I asked my dear friend Sir Oliver Humperdink to eliminate me every night as soon as the battle started. After I hit the floor, Humpy would stick out his hand and say, "No hard feelings."

I would grab his hand, pull him out, and then we would walk up the aisle together, leaving the rest of them to try and have a match. And boy, were they were atrocious. However, even though those battle royals never stole the show, they were fun, and the people really liked it. We put Jim Cornette over every night, by the way. Jim was great. I had mentioned in an earlier chapter about his fear of flying, but during this run, when Ric Flair and I were on the plane, he felt a little more comfortable - and if David Crockett was on, he would say, "All three of these guys have been down and they're still with us!"

In his eyes - the fact that the three of us had been in plane crash made the odds of being in another one pretty high!



Eventually, I pushed for Al Perez to get a run with NWA Champion Ric Flair. Dusty booked a couple of matches between them, and things started off well, until Kevin Sullivan approached me with a serious issue.

“We have a potential problem,” Kevin said. “Al told me he’s planning to stretch Ric and take his belt during their match at the Bayfront Arena in St. Petersburg, Florida.”

I figured Al must have been kidding around, and that Kevin took him seriously, so I brushed it off – but just to be sure, I asked Al if he really said that. To my disbelief, Al confirmed it.

“Ric can’t wrestle and I can,” he told me. “The Bayfront Arena will be the perfect place to do it. I’ll take the belt from him, and if they want it back, they can give me a big fat contract.”

That was Al’s mindset, and I couldn’t talk him out of it - no matter how hard I tried. His taking Ric’s belt was non-negotiable, and it put me in a real bind. I was always loyal to my talent - but there’s a limit. Al Perez was looking to sabotage an NWA World Title match that I fought for him to get. I knew I had to do what was right for the business, so I told Al that I couldn’t be a part of his scheme. Then, I found Kevin and confirmed what Al had told him. Kevin told me not to show up at the Bayfront Arena for their match, and that the office would handle it.

I obviously wasn’t there that night, but from what I understand, Al entered the ring, and his whole family was there. He was a Florida boy, and the Cuban community turned out to support him. As he stood in the ring, Doug Dellenger, the head of security, went down and told him to get out of the ring. It was then announced that there was a clause in the contract that said I had to be in Al’s corner or the contract wasn’t valid, and since I wasn’t there, the match couldn’t go on. They finally got Al out of the ring, Eddie Gilbert came in to wrestle Ric that night, and they fired Al on the spot.

Al called me as soon as he got home, wondering why I didn’t show up, adding, “I thought we were partners.”

“Yes, we were partners,” I said. “However, I didn’t condone what you wanted to do, and I made that very clear with you. I’m sorry you lost your job, and if there’s anything I can do to help you in the future, please don’t hesitate to let me know.”

We left it at that and went our separate ways. It was an unfortunate ending to a great partnership, but believe me when I tell you, Al wasn’t just thinking of shooting on Ric Flair - he was going to do it! Ric Flair would have put up a hell of a fight, though, because Ric is a tough guy, and is no slouch. I saw Ric beat up all three of The Fabulous Freebirds in forty-five seconds - legit. They were drinking and getting cute with Ric one night, so he invited them outside. They went out and Ric decked them all, then came back in and finished his drink. Then, when they came back in, he bought them a round. That’s the kind of guy “The Nature Boy” is.

I have to say -in Al’s defense - the travel schedule with Crockett Promotions was very tough. We had been on the road for a long time, and Al got road weary, was clearly not thinking

straight, and just needed to go home. It's a big difference going from a regional promotion like World Class to a national company like Crockett Promotions. One time during that run, I worked sixty-three days in a row without being off! We would hit all the major cities, and then turn around and start all over again. It was brutal. In wrestling, the road becomes your home, and you have to develop a lifestyle that is comfortable. With so much free time in hotels, airports, cars, and dressing rooms, I occupied myself with music and literature just so I wouldn't go crazy - and so I could go into my own little world, so to speak. I always had a love for music and reading, and those were the two things I spent most of my time doing. And when I would check into hotels, I would usually do it under my real name, but if any fans would find out and call me, I would check in under the name of Marvin K. Mooney - which was the name of the Dr. Seuss book that I used to read to my nephew when I would visit him in Chicago.

Al and I had a very good run together, though. Until he decided to shoot on Ric Flair, Al trusted me completely and was very loyal to me – as I was to him. I had great times with Al, and when he got a run with the WWF, I was overjoyed for him.

## Chapter 52: Bruiser Brody, R.I.P.

My wife, our two boys and I had just finished lunch and were heading back to the La Quinta Hotel in Charlotte, North Carolina. The La Quinta is where most of the wrestlers stayed while in the Charlotte area, because it was on the parkway and five minutes from the airport. Paul Ellering, The Road Warriors, and Steve Williams were standing in front of the La Quinta, and as we approached, Paul said, “Have you heard what happened? Bruiser Brody was murdered in Puerto Rico.”

As soon as I heard that, I told my wife to take the boys up to the room. I was completely stunned, and needed time alone to process what I just heard. When I finally went up to the room, Jason and Chad were just sitting on the couch. They weren’t talking or watching TV – they were just solemnly sitting there. I asked them where their mother was, and they said she was in the bedroom crying. As I went into our bedroom, there she was - crying. Between her sobs, she said to me, “You have to promise me right now that you will never ever go back to Puerto Rico, because what they did to Bruiser they will do to you.”

I assured her I would never go back, and then she asked me how Jason and Chad were taking it. I asked if they heard what Paul had said, and she thought so, but wasn’t sure. My family and Bruiser’s family were very close, and we visited each other often. When Bruiser’s wife Barbara and their son Geoffrey would come to Dallas for TV tapings, we would all get together. My boys knew Bruiser since they were born, and they knew Geoffrey – who was born between them – very well. I knew this was not going to be easy on them.

I went out into the living room of the suite, and my boys were still sitting there quietly. When I told them what happened, their first question was if Geoffrey was okay. I told them that Geoffrey didn’t travel to Puerto Rico with his dad, but instead stayed at home with his mom. They then begged me not to go back to Puerto Rico – and said that they didn’t want Abby to go back to Puerto Rico, either.

My family clearly didn’t want me going back to Puerto Rico, and I’m sure that any wrestler with a wife and kids – when they heard what happened to Bruiser Brody – had the same feelings that my wife and children had. After I promised them I would never go back, Jason and Chad kept asking me about Geoffrey, and if he was going to be okay. That seemed to be their main concern - if Geoffrey was going to be okay.

I wasn’t in Puerto Rico that day, but I’ve heard a hundred different versions of what happened. The actual story seems to be that Jose Gonzales – the booker for World Wrestling Council – stabbed Bruiser Brody to death in the locker room. That makes sense, because the only way Jose Gonzales could have killed Bruiser Brody was with a knife - because with fist and feet he wouldn’t have had a chance.

The real horrible shame of it all was that Jose committed an act that violent and that hideous - and no one got up to help. Brody was simply stabbed by a thug and then literally left to lay on the dressing room floor to die.

Jose should have been prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law, and either executed or made to stay behind bars for the rest of his life. However, in life, unfortunately, what should happen doesn't always happen, and his "trial" was just a big, sad state of affairs.

I had met Jose during my trips to Puerto Rico, and he said he knew me from Chicago, but I had no memory of him. I just looked at him as one of the local guys, and never did business with anyone other than Carlos Colon. Even though Jose committed the murder, Carlos ended up paying a heavy price, both with his business and in the way people looked at him. American wrestlers used to use Puerto Rico as their personal hideaway and vacation place, and all the young guys would go through Puerto Rico to learn how to become professional wrestlers. After the heinous murder, all of that was sacrificed, and Carlos could no longer get good, quality talent.

One thing that really aggravates me is when people make excuses for Jose Gonzales, offering feeble "reasons" as to why he killed Bruiser Brody. One of the top "excuses" is by saying that Brody cut a deal with Jose for a "guarantee," and then "held him up" by "demanding more money," thus "hijacking the promotion." People have the gall and the audacity to attribute that lie to his death in Puerto Rico, in a pathetic attempt to give that mother-fucker Jose some sort of a credible motive for doing what he did. It's ridiculous and insulting that I even have to address this, but for the sake of Bruiser Brody's legacy - and for the millions of people who care about it - I feel compelled to set the record straight on how his deals worked.

In an earlier chapter, I detailed how, while working for me in Texas, Bruiser Brody began taking bookings in other territories. During that time I was his manager, his booker, his agent, his advisor, and his friend, and he came to me for advice on a lot of things - especially money deals. For one of his very first outdates, he came to me saying that a certain promoter wanted to know what "guarantee" he wanted, and he then asked me what figure he should put out there. I cautioned him, "Bruise, never ask for a guarantee. That is the kiss of death, and is simply a trap that he is trying to lead you into. Yes, in Japan and Australia you will get guarantees for your tours, but when dealing with any other promoter you should always ask for a minimum - because that way, as business gets better for them, it will get better for you, as well."

I always worked like that, and that is exactly what I taught Bruiser Brody to do. Why should he go into a territory, help pop it, and not get paid? And from that day on, that was the way Bruiser Brody operated, and it became his standard way of doing business. So there is a big difference in agreeing to one deal and then suddenly changing your mind at the last second - which Brody never did - and quoting your minimum to a promoter, then asking for an increase when business goes up - which Brody surely did. However, Bruiser Brody wasn't unique in that regard, because any top guy worth his salt would have done the same.

Yes, he was a hard guy to deal with when it came to money because he wanted what he had rightfully coming to him, but he never called any deal a "guarantee," and he was never "dishonorable in his negotiations." Sure, Brody might have ruffled some feathers in his time, but Jose Gonzales was someone who came to that arena armed with a knife - intent on killing him.

For anyone to even attempt to give him an “out” for committing that vicious act of murder really pisses me off.

Bruiser was his own man and was the captain of his own ship. By 1988 – if you were going to be anybody in wrestling, you had to be on the USA Network or WTBS or you weren’t considered a “star.” Bruiser had been on TBS maybe four times in his whole life, and he was never on USA, but he was a star from being on regional TV. Bruiser was a very smart guy, and used his “regional” image to his advantage - going to places like southern Illinois, Fargo, North Dakota, or even a little town in Iowa to pick up \$300 a shot, because he understood that they were towns that guys like Hulk Hogan and Dusty Rhodes wouldn’t be caught dead in. Bruiser Brody was very unique in that regard.

Like I mentioned in an earlier chapter, I would receive many phone calls from promoters complaining about things Bruiser Brody did while working for them, and I would often tell Brody that just because he was mad at the promoter it was no reason to take it out on the crowd, mess up the town, have a bad match, or go short. Even if it’s a small house, the fans still got in their car, drove to the arena, and bought their tickets, and they deserved the same respect that he would give 20,000 fans, and by doing any different, he would just be screwing every guy in that territory over, because now the town will go back to being worse than it was before he got there. Brody understood that, and did his best to live by that. So whenever I hear people say bad things about Bruiser Brody, I just think to myself, “That’s not the Bruiser Brody I knew.”

He must have not liked you if he ever treated you badly in any way. Yes, he slapped a few guys around and could have a bad day for weeks, but he wasn’t that way unless someone made him that way. I met him in 1976, traveled with him all over the world, and in all our years together, there was never a cross word between us – ever. He was a wonderful, complex, brilliant man who enjoyed gothic art almost as much as his tuna, pork and beans. Bruiser Brody was such an important part of my career - and he helped me in ways you can’t imagine. When I heard he died, I just wanted to go away for a while and deal with it – but I couldn’t. Professional wrestlers at times like this seem to go on autopilot.

Once Brody’s death actually sunk in, I was mad, hurt, angry, and everything else you could possibly imagine. Bruiser Brody was my buddy for twelve years. When he worked in Dallas and wanted to stay at my home - he was always welcome. When I was in San Antonio or Austin, his gorgeous house in Boerne – beautifully furnished with antiques - was my house. My heart also ached for his wife, Barbara, and their son, Geoffrey. It’s so horrible to deprive a child of his father and to deny a wife the protection and love of a husband – and there was nothing Brody loved more than to be with his family.

I couldn’t bring myself to go to Bruiser Brody’s funeral. That doesn’t mean that I don’t have respect or feel pain for his family, it’s just something that I couldn’t do. I didn’t go to David and Mike Von Erich’s funerals, either. I just couldn’t do it. I would rather pretend Bruiser was in Japan, and think that maybe he would call me tomorrow and ask if I had any bookings.

Bruiser was many things to me, but most importantly, he was one of my very best friends until the day he died, and I miss him to this day. I only hope that I was as good a friend to him as he was to me.

## Chapter 53: Dusty the Booker

In November of 1988, Fritz Von Erich sold World Class to that hillbilly from Tennessee - Jerry Jarrett. Eric Embry was actually the one who brokered the deal with Jarrett - because for some odd reason he really wanted to go to Tennessee, and thought it was the heaven of all heavens. Fritz sold to Jarrett simply because he was at his wits end. Ken Mantell – who once again took over the book when I left - had let him down for a second time with his bad booking decisions. After Jarrett bought it, World Class was over, and the name simply became a tool to make Jarrett's promotion – the USWA – seem superior. Then, in August of 1989, I came home from a tour, and my boys told me that World Class had finally been put to rest for good. Apparently, on the World Class Championship Wrestling TV show, Eric Embry tore the World Class banner down and replaced it with a USWA banner. Even though it was something that I had helped create and took great pride in, I really didn't care who bought it or what they wanted to call it - I was just thankful that no one could diminish or stomp on the World Class name any longer.

After the sale of World Class, Ken Mantell was out of the wrestling business for good – branded a complete failure. He had failed in his attempt to destroy World Class in 1986, he failed as the booker in the UWF, he failed with his Wild West “promotion” in 1987, and he failed so badly when he booked World Class in 1988 that Fritz had to sell the company. Yet, after all that, Ken somehow managed to worm his way back into Bill Watts' life and – just as he did with Sam Cohen – convince Bill to be the sole investor in a vitamin business so they could be “equal partners.” They even moved to Australia together to start their new venture, where Ken stole money from Bill by bilking him for a large sum of cash in a sleazy scheme.

Ken Mantell has no moral center whatsoever. He would say anything he had to say and do anything he had to do in order to get what he wanted – even if it meant betraying his friends - and he would just hope he could slide by and no one would notice. Friendships in the wrestling business are a strange thing, though. Fritz Von Erich was a very close and longtime friend of Ken Mantell, and look at the vindictive way Ken screwed him over in 1986 when he left him high and dry. That, of course, begs the question as to how Bill Watts could trust Ken with one red cent after he saw firsthand what he did to Fritz - and it can only be answered by one word: Ego.

Ego can prevent many people from having the success that they should have, because they figure that since they're the smartest one in the room - there is no way anyone could screw them over and do them any harm. Fritz was same way, though. And I'm certainly not implying that Ken was smarter than Bill or Fritz – because he wasn't. It's just that Bill and Fritz's egos led them to see Ken Mantell as merely secondary talent – which he was - and they never in their wildest dreams believed that Ken could cause them the aggravation and problems that he eventually did, but the warning signs were clearly there – especially for Bill Watts. The reason I was so successful as a booker was because I kept my eyes open, watched what was going on around me, always paid attention, and never relied on stooges. A lot of times when someone attains a powerful position, they get into a situation where they are no longer in the real world,

and only know what people tell them – and those people are usually just kissing their ass or working them for their own agenda.

Ironically, in November of 1988 - the same month that Fritz sold World Class to Jerry Jarrett - Jimmy Crockett sold his wrestling company to Ted Turner. I've heard many bad things about Jimmy Crockett, and none of them ring true. If Jimmy did have one major fault, it's that he was too generous in the amount of money he paid his talent - including me. However, the WWF was raiding every promotion they could, so Jimmy panicked and started signing guys like Ric Flair, The Road Warriors, Sting, and Lex Luger to long term contracts at exorbitant salaries. Jimmy Crockett simply overextended himself trying to protect his talent pool - and that's what caused the downfall of Crockett Promotions.

Jimmy Crockett also gets a lot of flak for flying us all over the country in a Lear jet, but nobody seems to realize that the reason he flew his crew on private planes was so that we wouldn't have to stand in lines at airports. People also point to the scheduling of the flights as if they made no sense. For example, we would leave Charlotte and fly to Philadelphia. The next day we were scheduled to be in Baltimore, but rather than stay over, we would fly back to Charlotte, and then fly back to Baltimore the next day. The only reason we flew back and forth to Charlotte after every show was because Jimmy wanted us to be home with our families! He also arranged for limos to pick us up when the planes landed to take us wherever we wanted so we wouldn't have to wait or have any stresses during our travels. Believe me when I tell you, Crockett Promotions went broke in the most honorable way a company can go. Can the same be said about other promoters and the way their companies went out of business? When Bill Watts had to sell off his UWF, was it because he overspent on his talent? Anyone who worked for him knows the answer to that.

The Crockett's were always the most gracious people that I ever worked for. They paid me the best and really cared about me as a person. I went through a lot with that family. I was caught smoking pot, and Mr. Crockett overlooked it. Then, when my son fell out of the tree, Jimmy stood by me and gave me the time I needed to deal with it. And when Jimmy Crockett was getting ready to rumble throughout Texas and the southwest in 1988 – he sent Jim Barnett to recruit me. I am proud that I was there with them when they closed down Crockett Promotions, and I can't say enough good things about them.

After the sale, Ted Turner immediately put the wrestling company in the hands of Jim Herd, a former executive with Pizza Hut and TV studio manager who had no background or knowledge of wrestling. Jim Herd didn't even know who I was - and I had developed some of the biggest gimmicks and attractions in wrestling. He heard I was a manager and figured I was some guy who stood in the corner and pulled legs. I didn't take it personally, though, because he didn't know who Dusty Rhodes was, either! Jim Herd simply did not understand the power structure of professional wrestling, and had no comprehension of who the real players were. He was completely hoodwinked, and just took at face value what various wrestlers were telling him, allowing them to blow smoke up his ass and tell him how wonderful he was, when in reality, all they wanted was more money on their contract extensions.



A lot of people started saying some very harsh things about Dusty Rhodes, complaining that he always booked himself on top. Those people never took into consideration that he was, at the time, one of the biggest box office attractions that wrestling ever had, and was at the top of his game. It would have been a disservice to everyone on the card to put Dusty underneath, because Dusty drew money, and everyone who worked on his cards made money. It's horrible, the way people criticize Dusty even to this day. This thing with the Dusty finish? Come on! What about all the money he drew? All the great TV shows he produced? All the big shows he created? People are going to pick on him because he had a favorite finish?

He had over eighty wrestlers and ran three towns a night all across America. Yes, sometimes a guy got double booked. Yes, sometimes a guy got left off the show. Yes, sometimes a guy might have been bumped from the corporate jet. When someone is booking on a national scale and producing as many television shows as Dusty did, it's very easy to find little things like that to try and demean his ability. However, there's a lot of pressure in running a wrestling company. I ran Texas for almost seven, and when I finished up I was mentally and physically exhausted just from the intensity of the workload that I had to produce. So as someone who has sat down and booked TV shows, made payoffs, ran towns, and understands the complicated problems that can come with running a wrestling company, I think Dusty Rhodes was an excellent booker.

If you want to know the essence of who Dusty Rhodes is, this is it: He's a guy from Austin, Texas who made his way up through the ranks of wrestling, became a great box office attraction, a great booker, and a great TV producer. That's who Dusty Rhodes is, and anyone who would deny that has other reasons to not admitting it. I know that I'm coming off like a big Dusty Rhodes mark and that I'm taking his "side," but I do think that people are very hard on him. Dusty was a guy that I had given a hand up to in 1968 when he was a young wrestler, and when I went to work for him in 1988, he took fabulous care of me and repaid anything I had ever done for him tenfold. When I would end a tour and wanted to go home to Daytona for ten days to be with my family, it was no problem with Dusty. Working for him was as good as I had ever been treated, was as easy as I have ever had it, and I loved every second of it.

Guys like Sting and Lex Luger never showed the appreciation and respect they owed to Dusty, because without him, they would have been nothing. Lex Luger is just some guy who was over promoted by Dusty Rhodes, and could never live up to his hype. He never learned to work, and was never respectful of Dusty. And if you've watched one of Sting's matches, you've seen them all. People say that about Ric Flair, but that only happened after he became the World Heavyweight Champion, and he started working all around the country. When he was in the Carolinas earlier, every night was a different match. Plus, Ric was a great talent, and when he left the NWA, Sting and Lex Luger died, because he was the only one who could have a match with those two clumsy idiots. They would refer to Dusty as "The whale" and "The fat guy" behind his back, but when in his presence, they would beat the doors down to kiss his butt and act buddy-buddy with him. I thought that was the most hypocritical thing I ever witnessed.

Believe me, Dusty knew what they were saying, but he didn't care. As long as they did what he told them to do in the ring, and as long as they contributed to the card, he couldn't have cared less what was being said behind his back. He never sat around and second guessed himself

because of what other people said about him. I'll tell you one thing about Dusty Rhodes: If you work for him and tell him you're unhappy, then ask him why he did something, he'll tell you. Then he'll say, "If you don't like it you can leave. Or, you can get over it and stay."

Ric Flair was another guy who never said anything nice about Dusty. There was constant turmoil between them, but over what? Ric was the champion, he was driving in limos, flying on Lear jets, and making \$400,000 a year. What did he have to be upset about? The mere thought of Dusty wanting another brief run with the belt?

A lot of guys came to the Carolinas driving old, beat up cars, and after four years of Dusty's booking, they were all wearing Brioni suits, alligator shoes, and Rolex watches, living in big homes, driving Mercedes Benz, Jaguars, Cadillacs, and Lincolns, carrying Louis Vuitton's and Gucci's, and staying at the Hyatt rather than the Red Roof Inn. I had to sit and listen to all those guys say horrible things about Dusty. Why didn't they just look around and see the lifestyle that we were provided? Why didn't they remember that they came in driving a beat up old Volkswagon and a broken down Chevy? I'm not saying every guy was like that, but a lot of them were devoid of any respect.

The wrestlers in Tennessee who worked for the Jarrett's? They were mistreated. The wrestlers in San Antonio who worked for Joe Blanchard? They were mistreated. The wrestlers in Oklahoma who worked for Bill Watts? They were put on long trips and weren't paid very well. Most of the guys working for Jimmy Crockett when Dusty was the booker were making \$250,000 a year, minimum. I wish somebody would mistreat me that way today. So whenever I hear people saying bad things about Dusty Rhodes, I just think it's sour grapes on their part.

Unfortunately, by the time Jim Herd came in, there was so much negativity being thrown at Dusty that it seemed as if all the problems of the world were because of him, and if Dusty wasn't in the NWA, everything would be rosy. I got a call one day from Stanley Blackburn in Texas, telling me that Jim Herd was planning to let Dusty go. I actually didn't believe him, and told him that would be the worst possible move during this transitional time. Stanley seemed pretty positive that this was going to happen, because Jim Herd felt all the wrestlers were up in arms about him. A few days later, I saw Dusty in Kansas City, Missouri, and I called him off to the side, telling him, "Dusty, I heard a rumor that you might be let go."

Dusty just brushed it off, saying, "I have a contract!"

I found out later that Stanley had heard the rumor from none other than Lou Thesz. Jim Herd considered himself a great friend to Lou, but Lou just looked at Jim as some guy who had managed the television station where a wrestling tape had played on, and as someone he had gone out to dinner with a few times. Believe me, Lou Thesz did not consider Jim Herd one of his "tight friends."

Dusty had no idea his firing was coming. Even with my warning - he was completely blindsided when it happened. All of the crybabies and whiners that Dusty had made rich and famous ganged up on him, went to Herd, and cut his nuts off. However, they had to bring him back eventually, didn't they?

## Chapter 54: The Great Muta

In January 1989, Dusty Rhodes was replaced by George Scott, and the first wrestler that George recruited was former WWF Champion, The Iron Sheik. Jim Herd dutifully signed him up for a two year contract at \$300,000 per year, and his contract specifically stated that he had to be notified three months in advance if he was going to be let go. Well, Jim Herd forgot about that clause, and decided to fire The Iron Sheik about two months into his arrival with no notice. Because of that careless oversight, The Iron Sheik ended up making \$600,000 from the NWA, and probably wrestled a total of fifty matches for the company. That shows you a little of the incompetence of Jim Herd. He should have known what his contractual obligations were to the wrestlers, but he didn't know anything about talent negotiation. Jim Herd was a moron.

George Scott also brought Abdullah the Butcher in, and asked me to look after his business. Abby and I had that as a long-standing practice, anyway, because we were an old established firm and the fans knew us as a team. As soon as Abdullah arrived, George booked him in a match against Dick Murdoch at the upcoming Clash of the Champions. Since the Clash was going to be in New Orleans, Jim Herd wanted Abdullah to come to the ring with a marching band playing gospel-like funeral music. Now, anyone with common sense knows that there's a big difference in the mood that gospel-like music creates - and what Butchie's persona as "The Wildman from Sudan" was. Therefore, Abdullah refused. That's when Butchie was fired.

To replace Abdullah for the show, I brought in my old buddy Bob Orton to wrestle Dick Murdoch at The Clash. That night Dory Funk, Terry Funk, Gene Kiniski, Pat O'Connor, Buddy Rogers, and Lou Thesz were in attendance. It was a tribute to the NWA, and was a rare moment of brilliance from Jim Herd. That to me was a very exciting night, because it showed that the NWA had a rich history, even though we were now a part of Ted Tuner's company, and was the lone bright spot in Jim Herd's whole tenure with the company. Of course, after bringing in all of those former world champions – some of whom went back to the 1940's – the announcers never mentioned another word about the NWA, and eventually dropped it in favor of WCW. That right there shows the corporate mentality slowly creeping into the company.

It was great to be back with Bob Orton, though. He would bring his young son Randy on the road with him, and since Randy is the same age as my boys, I would bring them, and they would all play and go swimming in the hotel pools together. After his match with Dick Murdoch at the Clash, Bob and Dick were put into a lengthy program together that culminated with a bull-rope match at the Wrestlewar pay-per-view from Nashville, Tennessee. I really enjoyed that program with Dick, because he was such a wonderful guy. Everyone loved Dick Murdoch, and anytime anyone saw him, they got a big smile on their face. He always had a story to tell, and he loved wrestling with a passion like few guys I've ever known in my life. Dick Murdoch was the same way from the day I met him in 1966 until the day he died in 1996: A big, happy-go-lucky guy who enjoyed every moment of his life. He was a great friend of mine.

Dick and Bob did well together in their feud. They were two good friends doing what they wanted to do, and making a good living doing it. And even though they weren't in the main

event, they always had a good, solid match. Guys like Dick, Bob, and I never minded being the support act. As long as we were packing the buildings, we were pleased to be on the undercard. We weren't like Sting and Lex Luger, who felt that without them, the NWA would die. We understood it was the whole card, and realized that we were just a part of something bigger than us, and that we weren't the most important thing. Bob, Dick, and I understood what it took to make money. In the end, Jim Herd really stuck it to Bob big-time, and fired him with no just cause. Plus, since Jim had no idea who Bob Orton was, he let him go like he was a nobody. Bob gave everything he had to the NWA. He brought his fame from the WWF – which was considerable – and when it came to in-ring work, no one was better than Bob Orton. He was super cooperative and dependable in every way, and what did he get in return? Mistreated.

One day, George Scott pulled me aside and asked if I could develop another Great Kabuki. I told him that while I couldn't recreate The Great Kabuki, I could make something similar. What I actually ended up creating was the son of The Great Kabuki. However, I wanted to present him in a less scary manner than I had with his "father." I wanted to present this new character like he was a superhero that happened to be managed by a very bad guy - much like I did with The Spoiler and The Dingo Warrior.

There was a Japanese wrestler I saw at the very end of World Class named Keiji Mutoh. He had been in the business for five years and was in America wrestling as The White Ninja, but had never really gotten any opportunity. Although I had never met him and just saw him on TV, I saw something in him, and decided that he would be the one. I knew that Hiro Matsuda could get me in touch with him, because he was the one who got the working papers and visas for the Japanese talent in America. When I called Hiro and told him I was interested in Keiji Mutoh, he wasted no time in getting me in touch with him - because of my past successes with Pak Song and The Great Kabuki. Hiro even called up Keiji and told him that this was his "big opportunity."

When I first met Keiji, I liked his name and decided to use it, changing it ever-so-slightly to The Fabulous Muta. However, I quickly realized that it sounded too similar to The Fabulous Moolah, so I switched it to The Great Muta. I had such a passion when I was developing The Great Muta that all of my concentration, focus, and thoughts went into his creation, as well as to figuring out how best to present him. In 1989, The Great Muta was my sole priority, and I spent a lot of time perfecting him.

Because I was still developing The Great Muta, I didn't want him to appear in big towns or on TV before he was ready. Therefore, I got him booked in small towns throughout the Carolinas so we could perfect his character. I also had him watch tapes of The Great Kabuki, and explained to him that although I didn't want him to be like The Great Kabuki, I wanted him to be similar. For example, The Great Muta wouldn't do nun-chuck demonstrations or use the samurai sword like The Great Kabuki did, nor would he wear the multi-colored outfits. The only similarity the two of them would have would be the green mist, the ability to switch from wrestling to martial arts, and the painting of the face. However, I wanted The Great Muta to paint his face in an attractive way, and not in a scary, ugly way. Most importantly, however, was that I didn't want The Great Muta to be the vicious, mean, assassin-type wrestler like The Great

Kabuki was. I didn't even want to try and duplicate that. The Great Muta was going to be someone that children could enjoy.

I have to say that Keiji took to The Great Muta character like a fish to water, and he really captured what I was looking for. He was also a terrific person, and I really enjoyed his company. My two boys adored him, as well, because he would get them video games from Japan and hang out with them. He truly became part of our family, and some of my sons greatest memories are of spending time with me and The Great Muta.

Over time, The Great Muta became a good likeness of what The Great Kabuki's son would have been. When the time was right for him to debut on television, my biggest fear was that the fans would think I was repeating myself, and simply trying to make another Great Kabuki. Fortunately, they never did, because I carefully presented The Great Muta in a way that was totally unlike his "father." Plus, I waited long enough before I casually mentioned, "His father, The Great Kabuki ..."

As soon as I said that, the announcer Jim Ross was great, and jumped in with, "It's The Great Kabuki's son! I knew it!"

Once people found out that he was the son of The Great Kabuki, anyone who ever saw the Great Kabuki wanted to see his son - and when they saw him they were awestruck. Because I was very careful in not presenting him as just a duplicate of The Great Kabuki, I was very pleased that he was becoming a fan favorite, rather than a hated heel like his "father." He was especially cheered in cities like Philadelphia, Landover, and Baltimore. Those fans know what they like in wrestling - and The Great Muta was definitely someone they liked.

Then, just three months after being hired, George Scott was let go. It appeared that the wrestling business had passed him by. After his brief stint in World Class, he spent most of his time with real estate and golf, and had gotten uninvolved in wrestling. Then, when he came to the NWA, he had been out of the loop for so long that he lost his connection to what makes people buy tickets. He also didn't have a feel for what was happening in 1989 - with the changes in TV production and thirty men cards. For the first time in his life, George Scott was in over his head. However, it's also a possibility that George got back involved, and after realizing how much time it took, and how much dedication was required to do the job effectively, he decided it wasn't worth the struggle. In any event, once George Scott left, it was over. He represented the last semblance of any sort of sanity, because after that, Jim Herd instituted an absurd concept: The booking committee.

During its existence, the booking committee consisted of Ole Anderson, Jim Barnett, Jim Cornette, Ric Flair, Eddie Gilbert, Jim Herd, Jim Ross, and Kevin Sullivan. One night in St. Louis, Missouri, Ric Flair and Sam Muchnik took me up to the third floor dressing room, and asked me if I would like to be a part of the committee.

"Not really. I'm not interested," I told them. "I don't want to sit around a table, throw out ideas, and compete with other people to get mine through. I also don't want to spend time

coming up with an idea that I think could draw money, but by the time it makes it to the air, it's nothing like my original idea."

I was blunt with them, but that's my style. If you ask me something important, I'll give you my answer, and explain why I feel that way. Another reason I could not become part of their committee was because I didn't trust their judgment. The only ones on that committee who had a clue as to what should go on was Ole Anderson and Jim Barnett, but Jim was getting old and just wanted to enjoy his final years with as little aggravation as possible, and Ole was not willing to fight another war – he was just content in getting his salary. Plus, half of the committee made a living from actually wrestling in the ring, so they brought their own agendas to the table.

If Jim Herd wanted to interview me for the booking job, and check my past accomplishments as booker in Florida, Georgia, Texas, and North Carolina, that would have been fine. I had tenure of fourteen years as a booker and was very successful in every area I ever went to. I had developed and created many guys that are household names to this very day. I would have taken the booking job, but I wouldn't take a job to sit in a room with a lot of other people, because I knew that nothing creative can come from a committee. And don't get me wrong - I had worked alongside other bookers before – Dory Funk, Wahoo McDaniel, and Ernie Ladd in the Carolinas to be specific – but Jimmy Crockett was smart enough to give us individual states that we were responsible for. That way, we wouldn't be fighting each other for angles and would just pitch ideas for the group of guys we had. The booking committee concept reminded me of the old saying, "Too many cooks in the kitchen," and I knew that there was a reason that saying had been around for a long time. Yes, I'm stubborn, set in my ways, and have strong opinions - but I made everyone that I was ever with money. With all that said, I should also add that I was the furthest thing in Jim Herd's mind as to what a booker should be.

The Great Muta was booked in a series of matches with Eddie Gilbert. Eddie was an excellent worker, but he was also on the booking committee, and the committee didn't want Eddie to lose. That was fine, and I accepted that. There were lots of times I didn't want my guys beat. So one night in Fort Bragg, North Carolina, it was suggested that The Great Muta blow Eddie with the green mist for a disqualification. I didn't mind using the mist ceremonially before the match where it's blown into the air, but I didn't want to use it for a disqualification, because after a while, it loses its effectiveness. However, the committee insisted on the green - so that's what they got.

We used to pack a condom the size of a pinky-tip with green mist, but this time I told The Great Muta to make one the size of a thumb. The match was set up so that Eddie's wife and valet, Missy Hyatt, would jump on the apron during the match, so I instructed The Great Muta, "When you see Missy on the ring apron, hit Eddie with your super-kick, then turn and blow Missy green."

Missy was in a very skimpy outfit that day, and when The Great Muta turned and blew Missy, it was a sight! Not knowing she was going to get hit with it, all of the emotions that you would want a person to deliver, we got. She was mad, angry, screaming, and hollering. It was magnificent. As I came back through the curtain after the match, the entire booking committee was standing there furious with me.

Hey - they wanted green – they got green!

The booking committee got their revenge when they told me that every time The Great Muta and Eddie would wrestle, Missy would come running from the back with a kendo stick to chase me away from the ring. Now, it was meaningless and senseless for her to carry a kendo stick, because The Great Muta never carried one. They were clearly confusing him with The Great Kabuki. So when they told me that, I simply replied, “Gary Hart doesn’t run from a lady.”

They insisted that this had to happen, so I suggested, “Why don’t you do it with Paul Heyman? He’ll do anything as long as you give him TV time.”

And even though it made absolutely no sense whatsoever - that’s exactly what they did. By the way, my refusal to partake in that silly angle had nothing to do with Missy Hyatt. I knew Missy from World Class when she was with John Tatum, and I always found her to be very sweet.

The Great Muta was then programmed in a long feud with Sting, which included a match at The Great American Bash in Baltimore, Maryland. For one of their matches at an outside show in Florence, South Carolina, I had my children with me. It was a really hot crowd that night, so just before our match, I told Sting I didn’t want to get involved, because I didn’t want to have any problems later that night with my children across the street at the Cadillac Motel. Of course, during the match, Sting took a few swipes at me. I yelled at him to leave me alone, but he shot back, “You think you’re too good to work with us, huh?”

It was in the process of their match, so I dropped it, but I was really angry. The heels and babyfaces had separate dressing rooms, so after the match I went to the back and told referee Nick Patrick, “You tell Sting I want to see him right now, and if he doesn’t get over here in five minutes, I’m coming to get him.”

I waited a few minutes, and then in walked Sting.

“What do you want?” He asked.

“Ever since I’ve been here - first with Al Perez, and now with The Great Muta - we’ve gone out there every night and made you look like a million bucks,” I told him. “We’ve done everything in our power to keep you over and take care of you, and you’ve done everything in your power to kill us off. Then you make a remark like that out there to me? What’s the matter with you?”

“If you weren’t so old,” Sting sneered, “I would kick your ass right now.”

“Don’t let my age bother you, but just remember, I fight back,” I replied. “So before you mess with me, go talk to people like Michael Hayes and Ric Flair and find out who you’re messing with - and you’ll realize that I’m giving you a pass by letting you walk out of this room in one piece.”

He apparently did speak with Michael and Ric, because after that I was Mr. Hart to him.

One night, he had bought a pair of brand new yellow tights and white boots, and he had the gall to ask me if The Great Muta wouldn't blow him green because he didn't want to get his new clothes messed up – while he was standing there was his face painted up! Boy, did I make sure that The Great Muta blew him green that night!

I never took Sting seriously, though. He was rude to fans, and had an ego the size of the world. One of his “things” was to walk through the airport and imitate and make fun of retarded people - and he was a fan favorite! It was embarrassing. I don't know how he is now. I hear that he's a changed man, and I hope he is.

As I mentioned earlier, by the way I designed it, The Great Muta was extremely popular with the fans, and a lot of times during his matches against Sting, the people would chant “MU-TA! MU-TA!”

As pleased as I was, that drove Sting nuts, and he whined about it so much that the booking committee started getting on me because The Great Muta wasn't being received as a heel. They constantly threw that at me in my face. I actually had to point out to them, “What's the difference if they love him or hate him? If The Great Muta is entertaining the people, putting butts in the seats, and helping the television ratings, shouldn't we all be thrilled?”

Unfortunately, the booking committee couldn't wrap their collective heads around that concept, and felt that if I managed someone he had to be a heel. They had a certain mindset and couldn't think outside that box. That's when the booking committee came up with an idea to create two Great Muta's: A “good” Muta and a “bad” Muta. They wanted to get another Japanese wrestler who looked identical to The Great Muta - which would have been very difficult, because Keiji is 6'2”, and there aren't many 6'2” Japanese wrestlers around - make them tag team partners, and then have them feud. Jim Barnett, Jim Ross, and Jim Herd pulled me aside one day with that doozy. They were busy looking for another Great Kabuki while I was satisfied and focused on what we had: The Great Muta. So no matter what they insisted, I was not about to make The Great Muta a vicious heel just to please the committee and Sting – because it would piss off the fans, and would be ridiculous to make him what the people clearly didn't want him to be.

Then, since everything was black and white with the booking committee, they felt that since The Great Muta was being received as a babyface, I should stop managing him that very instant. First of all, The Great Muta wasn't the first guy that I had managed that people liked. Before him, the fans managed to fall in love with men like The Spoiler and The Great Kabuki – remember the stories I shared about Christmas night 1968 and the 1984 David Von Erich Memorial? The fans also loved Dusty Rhodes, Bruiser Brody, and The Dingo Warrior on a nightly basis – in spite of the fact that I was their manager. The fans loved each and every one of them, but I continued to manage them and develop their careers - standing by their side every night. And when the time was right – I didn't hesitate to turn all of them babyface. I never refused doing it when the time was right, and when it was in the best interest of all parties



concerned. I also knew that when the time was right, The Great Muta and I would split up – and he would embark on a great babyface run. I would be a fool not to do that.

At that moment, though, I had one obligation and one obligation only: To take care of The Great Muta's career. George Scott asked me to develop a Kabuki-like gimmick, I found Keiji Mutoh, and was in the process of building him into a marquee name around the world. The Great Muta had only been with me for three months, and was just grasping what we were creating. I knew that it was going to take him a while to realize who he was and what we were doing, and at that point in time, he clearly wasn't ready to be on his own. Yes, he was a great worker, but he was still coming to me during his matches for instructions. I had to make him understand that he was no longer The White Ninja – he was The Great Muta, and he had value.

It may sound strange to you, but for a lot of guys – especially those who had worked underneath for a long time – once someone plucks them out of the opening matches and decides to give them a push, it's very hard for them to understand who they are becoming - or who they had already become. It's a very difficult thing to take a young guy and mold him and develop him into who I know he can be, and just because he was over at that moment doesn't mean that he would stay over. Developing someone's career is sort of like painting a picture on a blank canvas. I have an idea in my head where I'm going, but I don't really know what it will look like until it's through. Once I know I'm finished, I let the gimmick morph into whatever the fans want it to be – and then turn my attention to developing someone else.

And if you think I'm taking too much credit for The Great Muta's success, do some research and see how long Keiji Mutoh had been doing second and third matches before I took him under my wing and made him a sensation. Then ask yourself - why wasn't he a sensation before?

So as I was in the midst of developing The Great Muta, the booking committee was desperate to break us up. All those learned men – didn't they know that Rome wasn't built in a day?

## Chapter 55: Telling History Unchecked

Wrestling dirtsheet writer Dave Meltzer didn't help matters by starting and perpetuating the asinine myth that I convinced The Great Muta that American fans would "never accept" a Japanese wrestler as a babyface. I want to take this opportunity to put an end to that insulting, accusatory crap about me and The Great Muta, because a lot of times rumor and innuendo become fact. It's wrong for Meltzer to keep writing that as if it were true - because it isn't - and it makes me sound like a selfish, desperate liar who only had the ability to hang onto The Great Muta's coattails - and I resent that.

These days, Dave has become chummy with a lot of wrestlers, but it wasn't always so easy for him. One time, Road Warrior Hawk, Steve Williams, and I were standing by the door at the Kaiser Arena in Oakland, California, and someone pointed Dave Meltzer out to us. Hawk hated Dave's guts, so he walked over and told him to leave. Dave would never admit that, though. Things have changed, and now he spends a lot of time with the very wrestlers who tell him things to write about, so how impartial can he really be?

In any event, it should be known that Dave Meltzer never bothered to check out what his "source" - who clearly had an issue with me - claimed I said to The Great Muta before spewing his garbage in that dirtsheet of his, because not once did Meltzer ever call me to confirm it like a real reporter would have done. And that's not a slam - it's the truth. So not only does Dave Meltzer have no journalistic credibility as far as I'm concerned, but he also has zero insight into how I developed The Great Muta, and he clearly isn't aware of my track record, either.

By 1989, I had been in the business for a long time, and saw firsthand how American fans had consistently accepted plenty of Japanese wrestlers as babyfaces - Duke Keomuka, Hiro Matsuda, Professor Toru Tanaka, and The Great Kabuki, just to name a few. And it was so obvious to both The Great Muta and I that the American fans were clearly accepting him as a babyface that we would have been denying our own ears for Meltzer's claim - which he has written a couple of times over the years now - to hold any water. I suppose Meltzer thinks I was some kind of mysterious svengali with a magical hold over The Great Muta and could sell him the Brooklyn Bridge if I wanted - but give The Great Muta some credit. The only thing I ever tried to convince The Great Muta was, "You can do this... You can make a lot of money... Just take care of the gimmick."

I love wrestling fans. They made me a great living for many years, so I say this with no disrespect, but for some reason, certain fans have become so markified when it comes to Meltzer that he is looked at as the premier wrestling journalist and historian - even though he's nothing more than a mark trying to crack smart. This self-appointed authority on wrestling has made a very nice living out of just writing what people tell him without doing any corroborating research. Now, if he chooses to handle his "reporting" that way, fine, but the next time you read one of his newsletters, keep his journalistic integrity - or lack thereof - in mind, because, as his lack of follow-up on my story has proven, he clearly hasn't realized that his "sources" are more than likely working him for their own benefit, and to "get back" at people they don't like in the industry.

I have no issue with journalists or historians. However, a true journalist would bother to speak with both sides of a story before making potentially damaging and baseless accusations, and they wouldn't allow others to treat them as a puppet or mouthpiece for their own agenda. And if someone is purporting to write a "history" of a territory, they should at least take the time to do some research and demonstrate they understand the subject they are discussing, and maybe even interview the people who were there in order to get a proper perspective. In order to help the sales of his floundering newsletter, he once wrote a "history of World Class" that was full of inaccuracies because he was probably in such a rush to meet his weekly deadline that he didn't care enough to speak with Bill Mercer, Mickey Grant, Kevin Von Erich, or myself. I don't know who he spoke with in order to get his erroneous information, because whoever he did is reinventing history and is attempting to defame the people who actually built World Class.

If you ever want to know who Meltzer's stooges are - just look and see who he writes gloriously about. For instance, in his "World Class history" issue, he claimed it was Ric Flair who made the Von Erich boys. So with all their sellouts since Kevin's debut in 1976 - they were "nothing" until Ric Flair entered the picture? Not only does that statement show Meltzer's ignorance, but it also pisses in the face of guys like Mark Lewin, Tim Brooks, and Don Jardine. And even Harley Race, for that matter. Harley was having sellouts with the Von Erich boys long before Ric ever got the NWA Title. And by no means am I attempting to diminish Ric's contribution to the Von Erich boys' success. As I have detailed in this book, he was a very important cog in the wheel - but to suggest he was the only cog without mentioning anyone else, to me, reeks of an agenda.

He also got his personal attack in on me when he basically accused me of lying about how I brought The Fabulous Freebirds to Texas in 1982 - suggesting that perhaps I booked a match with them in 1983 - right after saying I wasn't even there in 1983! Meltzer's version is that Michael Hayes came to "San Antonio" and then recruited Terry Gordy and Buddy Roberts once he saw how good business was. I certainly hope Michael isn't one of Dave's sources - because why he would lie about what I did for his career is beyond me.

And how Meltzer could write that Mickey Grant wasn't a player in World Class - and give the production credit to Keith Mitchell instead - makes no sense. Keith Mitchell was Mickey's assistant, and merely pulled cables for the hand-held cameras. The only thing I can surmise is that Keith is one of Dave's stooges, and if that is the case, then Keith has seriously padded his resume and pulled the wool over Dave's eyes, because for anyone to minimize Mickey's influence on that show is a joke.

Dave has also continuously defined Texas pre-1983 as a "small," "sleepy," "struggling," "playground." He considers Dallas, Fort Worth, Austin, Odessa, Midland, Lubbock, Amarillo, El Paso, San Angelo, Abilene, Tyler, and Albuquerque a small territory? I booked that territory from June 1976 through January 1983, and with his revisionism, one must wonder why, if it was such a "struggling" territory, I wasn't fired. Instead, I ended up with one of the longest continuous serving tenures of any booker! And I was paid very well based on the weekly attendances, and would love to know when this "lull" that he is always talking about happened.

Meltzer also wrote that I wasn't being "accurate" in recounting the death of my friend Bruiser Brody. He has a lot of gall to make a comment like that, and then turn around and write fictionalized tales about how Brody "quit" his job as booker of World Class because of the way Fritz promoted the Memorial show, and about how Fritz Von Erich had a "war" with Ed McLemore in the 1960's. Those two stories are beyond inaccurate – they're totally made up. I explained earlier in the book exactly how Brody lost his job as booker, and believe me when I tell you that Fritz and Ed had a very tight connection from the day they met until the day Ed died in 1969.

So while Dave Meltzer sits around and rewrites history, he has the balls to accuse other people of telling history unchecked?

In giving his "history lesson," Meltzer also got in some cheap shots about Fritz hitting his son, Mike, and about Sunshine having a "nervous breakdown," which amount to nothing more than vicious, unsubstantiated hearsay. Dave Meltzer makes himself out to be something really special when he's nothing more than a gossip monger - even below Rona Barrett. And yes, I knowingly threw that name in there just to torment him, because he has this bizarre hang-up with "dated references." And this is a phobia coming from a so-called "historian," mind you.

I had to laugh when he wrote how Fritz Von Erich wrestled Gene Kiniski at Texas Stadium in 1968, because Texas Stadium didn't even open until 1971. It would have been so easy for him to check on that, and why he didn't even bother to do a simple Google search is beyond me. The fact that one of his paying readers had to point that out to him a week later is downright pathetic. Now, if you think that's just a minor point – think again. If a supposed historian could make such a huge blunder like that without realizing it – imagine how much else he gets wrong.

Dave Meltzer alleges that he used to be a newspaper reporter in Wichita Falls. Well, now we know why he didn't last at that job. I would say he's a complete fraud, but if he does have one accomplishment, it's in his ability to con a couple of thousand wrestling fans out of almost three dollars apiece each week to read his bullshit newsletter.

Anyhow, getting back to 1989, just to show that I wasn't "clinging" to The Great Muta for selfish or monetary reasons, I will share with you this story. While all of the nonsense was going on with the booking committee, Steve Harms had a very dear friend named Leon White, who – as I detailed earlier - was wrestling in Japan as Big Van Vader. One night after the matches in Denver, Colorado, Leon, Steve, and I went out to dinner. Vader wanted to come to the NWA, and asked if I would manage him. I told Leon that I would love to have an opportunity with him, but I was still in the building process with The Great Muta.

"Right now I could not do you justice," I explained to Leon. "I'm devoting all my time and energy to The Great Muta. However, I think you will be perfect for the NWA, and I will personally take your tape and give it to Jim Barnett. I'm sure he will bring you in."

I did take the tape, and Vader did come in. I could have managed Sid Vicious and Danny Spivey at the time, as well - but I wasn't greedy. I truly wanted to continue developing The Great Muta - and wanted to give him all of my attention.

## Chapter 56: The J-Tex Corporation

Terry Funk was preparing for a long program with NWA World Champion Ric Flair, and was figuring that it might be his last big run. His brother Dory suggested that he ask me to handle his affairs during what was sure to be a grueling program for him. Even though I had just turned down managing Vader, and passed on Sid Vicious and Danny Spivey, managing Terry Funk was different. First of all, I wouldn't be developing him - just watching out for him and taking care of his business. Second of all, I had managed him on other occasions, like in Florida. Thirdly, after all Terry and I had been through together, how could I possibly say no? Any time I could ever do anything for the Funk boys, I did it. I've managed them both and wrestled them both, and we've always had a good relationship.

When I became Terry's manager, I made things as easy as possible for him. That way, the only thing he had to concern himself with was the match itself. Everything else I would handle: His positioning on television, his interview content, angles, finishes, and things like that. Terry left all that up to me, because he knew who I was and what I had accomplished, and was comfortable with my choices. A great part of my success was the trust that I gained with the guys that I managed. Terry knew that if something needed to be done, I was ready to stand up and do it, and if there was something that needed to be changed, I was willing to fight with the office in order to fix it. And I never worried about getting fired. I just didn't care.

Around this time, the management started offering contracts to all of the talent. I told Jim Barnett that it would be a conflict of interest if I signed one, because The Great Muta and Terry Funk could no longer look at me as a free agent looking after them. Call me crazy, but I felt that as someone who manages talent, if I had a contract with the company, it would be a conflict of interest, because I would be expected to do what was best for the company rather than for my guys. I was old school, though, and my whole life had been on a handshake deal. I didn't need a contract. I was a man of my word, and that's what I lived on. Don't cry for me, though, because I will say this: I made as much or more than The Great Muta and Terry Funk made - because I was heavily involved in both of their programs. Jim Barnett understood what I was doing and made sure I was financially very well compensated. I could have easily signed the contract, gotten an extension, kept my mouth shut, and made light of the situation - but that wouldn't be me.

Terry Funk's matches with Ric Flair were drawing big money, but during their run, Terry got an infection in his arm. Over a period of three weeks, his arm kept getting worse and worse. It was discolored, oozing puss, and sickening looking. It also had an aroma to it - and it didn't smell healthy. Anyone who knows Terry knows he doesn't complain about being hurt. Every night, as I wrapped his arm up, I would nag, "Terry, you've got to take time off."

"I'm wrestling the Nature Boy on top in full buildings, making money - and you are too!" He would argue.

"That's true," I would concede. "However, your arm is really bad and it's beginning to smell."

Even with his “Terry Funk attitude,” he got to the point where he was physically unable to go out and perform every night. No amount of money is worth risking your arm over, and it was obvious to me that he needed to go to the hospital, so I told the booking committee - the people responsible for taking care of the talent - that Terry had to take time off to recuperate his arm. They just looked at me and said that he said he “felt fine.”

“You know how Terry is!” I argued.

Finally, I told Terry, “I don’t care what you or the booking committee thinks. I’m taking you to the hospital right now, or I’m calling your wife and telling her about your condition.”

“Don’t do that!” He panicked. “My girls will go crazy!”

“I don’t care. You could end up losing your arm!”

Terry is an old war horse and will never accept defeat. It wasn’t until under threat of me calling his wife that he finally agreed to go to the hospital. After getting him to the hospital, I called his wife and told her that he was okay - but in the hospital. She immediately jumped on a plane and came to see him. By that time, Terry and I were friends for twenty-three years, and nobody knew him better than me. If I hadn’t made him go to the hospital, he would have kept wrestling and gotten a staph infection that would have put him out of the business for good, or he would have gotten a blood clot and ended up dead.

I brought Dick Slater in to replace Terry in his matches, and the fans made somewhat of a fuss over that. Of course, I understood that people were upset that Terry had to cancel some shows, but believe me - he was in no condition to wrestle. He was sick and only getting sicker, and seriously had to stop. Besides, it’s not like I picked Dick Slater out of thin air, or just threw a dart on the wall. Dick and I had a long history together, and it made logical sense for me to bring him in. Dick was in excellent condition at that time, and did a great job subbing for Terry.

In addition to Terry, I had to worry about The Great Muta’s health, as well. The Great Muta used the moonsault as his finish, and would land on his knees to protect his opponent. He took a tremendous pounding on his knees night after night, and started telling me, “Gary-son...I don’t know...my knees...”

Japanese people will not admit to injury. In their culture, to succumb to pain is a sign of weakness, so I knew he was in serious pain. In order to protect his knees, I came up with two other finishing maneuvers for him to use at house shows. One was where he would figure four his opponent’s head and put him to sleep, then stand over his opponent’s body and blow the guy green. That always got a big pop. Another move was where he would lay his opponent down on his belly, apply the figure four, and then lean backwards to grab his opponent’s head. Then, when his opponent gave up, he would blow the green mist up in the air and roll out from under it so the mist could settle on his opponent. That was also spectacular looking. I understood the importance of doing the moonsault on television, however, because the people waited for that moment in the match when he would do it, so we saved the moonsault for TV only. As time went by, after I would lay out the finish to the referee at the house shows, I would get word that the

booking committee wanted the moonsault off the top rope. They couldn't have cared less what kind of pain he was in, and were willing to take advantage of the Japanese mentality and use him until he was a cripple.

The Great Muta also developed a hematoma on his stomach wall. He got that from an incident stemming from a match at The Clash of the Champions in New Orleans, when he wrestled Steve Casey. Steve was wearing these big, oversized boots to make him look taller, and when he kicked The Great Muta with the point of his boot, he really laid into him and tore the outside of The Great Muta's abdominal walls. Once it got to the point where The Great Muta could hardly get out of bed in the morning, I asked the booking committee to give him some time off. In their infinite wisdom, they figured I wasn't really looking to get time off for The Great Muta - but for me, instead. I actually got a phone call from Eddie Gilbert, saying, "Gary, we're giving you the week off, but we're going to keep booking The Great Muta."

I went off on Eddie, screaming, "The Great Muta is the one who needs the time off - not me!"

As soon as I got off the phone with Eddie, I immediately called Jim Barnett, yelling, "Jim, in all the years we've known each other, you should know me well enough to know that I would never complain about my guy just so I could get myself some days off. I don't need any time off - The Great Muta's the one that's injured. Would you like me to bring him to you so you can see the hematoma? It will be obvious that this kid is in pain!"

For them to think that I was trying to hustle a few days off for myself using The Great Muta as an excuse was insulting to me - and it showed their total incompetence.

By the way -given that I have pulled no punches when discussing how certain wrestlers used prescription medication to deal with their injuries - I think it's only fair that I also point out Terry Funk and The Great Muta as perfect examples that not all wrestlers with injuries revert to medication. Most of them endure the pain.

Terry Funk and I were trying to come up with a big idea for his return from the hospital when we came up with the now infamous "bag angle." There was a Clash of the Champions from Columbia, South Carolina, and Terry and I decided to attack Ric Flair, put a bag over his head, and suffocate him on national television. We were really worried that, because we were doing it after his match, Ric wouldn't be able to get enough air. After having a long, grueling match - which was Ric's forte - it's not uncommon for wrestlers to get winded, and it becomes very hard to breathe. Therefore, if you ever see a tape of the angle, you'll notice that before I leave, I walk around the pole and look right at Ric to make sure he hadn't really suffocated before I left.

That angle was way over the top for TBS, and their phone lines lit up moments after we did it. People were incensed that Terry and I tried to suffocate someone on TV, and it was so controversial that when the Clash re-aired two hours later, they did not run the "bag angle." After the fallout, Jim Herd wanted to know exactly whose idea it was, and I ended up taking the heat for it. Interestingly, that particular angle is still a hot-button issue, because when the WWE put it



on their “Best of Ric Flair” DVD recently, England made them take the “bag angle” out before it could be sold over there.

Since I was managing The Great Muta and Terry Funk, I came up with The J-Tex Corporation by combining Japan and Texas. The NWA had a slew of managers at the time, so by calling myself the Executive Director of J-Tex, I felt it presented me in a different light, much like when I came up with H&H, Ltd. J-Tex was an organization within an organization, and a way to separate us from the other talent, because I always felt that the little things were just as important as the big things. People picked up on it right away and really liked it. Jim Ross really helped, as well, because he painted the picture that it was a big corporation of Japanese and Texans and we were making an invasion. He was very helpful with that angle.

I even put Terry Funk and The Great Muta together as a tag team, which apparently was something of a big deal - given Terry’s allegiance to All Japan and The Great Muta’s ties to New Japan. Anyhow, they teamed up for a Halloween Havoc pay-per-view where they wrestled the team of Ric Flair and Sting in an electrified steel cage match. This was based out of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, so Bruno Sammartino was brought in to be the guest referee that night. Bruno was very friendly and cordial to me, and wasn’t as cold as he had been in the past. As I had mentioned, the cage was electrified, and it had all of these Halloween decorations on it. Right before the match started, someone turned on the electricity, and way up on top of the cage, one of the decorations caught on fire. The Great Muta saw that and immediately scampered up the top rope and blew it out with his green mist. I was so proud of him.

Terry was then booked for an “I Quit” match against Ric Flair at The Clash of the Champions in Troy, New York. The finish was that Terry would quit, I would get mad at Terry, Terry would attack me, The Great Muta would come to my rescue, and then Terry and The Great Muta would start a feud.

Remember - the match was supposed to be an “I Quit Match,” but the booking committee switched it at the last minute to an “I Quit Wrestling” match, and retired Terry Funk! That night, after his match, The Great Muta came down to jump on Terry with me – just as we had planned - but their feud never happened. Terry and The Great Muta would have done great business in the ring, but instead, the booking committee put Terry in a situation where he had an interview segment called Funk’s Grill. Then, they never followed up on him, and just ignored that he was there. If the booking committee were men of their word - and if Terry and The Great Muta actually did get to have a program - Terry and I would have come up with a way for us to double cross The Great Muta and make him the babyface. Like I mentioned earlier - I would have had no problem doing that when the time was right.

## Chapter 57: I Had Herd Enough

With Terry “retired” by the booking committee, I went to one of the booking meetings and pitched The Great Muta as the next challenger for Ric Flair’s World Title. I told them that the best way to set up their series would be to book them in a non-title match on TBS, and after twenty minutes, have The Great Muta pin Ric.

Some members of the committee looked at me like I had gone mad for suggesting the World Champion be pinned – as if I was the first one to ever come up with such a far-fetched angle. Actually, it’s kind of booking 101.

Book a non-title match.

Have the champion put his opponent over.

Voila, you’ve established a credible opponent.

It wasn’t something so outside the box that it had never been done before, yet I had to sit there and defend it and explain why I thought it would work. When the meeting ended, I left with the understanding that when we did the TV taping on Wednesday, we would be using my idea to start our run. Jim Barnett and Kevin Sullivan even walked me out of the meeting, with Jim commenting, “I think you handled yourself well, presented your case perfectly, and I’m glad you got what you wanted.”

Then, when The Great Muta and I got to Center Stage in Atlanta that Wednesday, I was informed that Buzz Sawyer would come out during the match and attack Ric, and then Muta would get the pin. I refused, because that win would be considered a joke, and The Great Muta had worked too hard to take a cheap win. Jim Barnett and Kevin Sullivan begged me to make this “one concession,” but if I made that concession, I would be cheating The Great Muta out of all his hard work. Finally, I told them that if Buzz Sawyer had to interfere, it would be better to disqualify The Great Muta, because he didn’t need any outside help to win his matches, because at that time – he was undefeated.

This was not the first time that the booking committee double-crossed me and pulled a bait-and-switch with my talent. They lied about Terry’s “I Quit” match, and now they lied about The Great Muta’s win over Ric. I couldn’t trust anything those people told me, and if they told me it was snowing in Alaska - I would know it was a lie. The booking committee and their constant games had me so upset that even my old buddy Sir Oliver Humperdink couldn’t mellow me out. I knew my patience was wearing thin with the bureaucracy of the booking committee and the incompetence of Jim Herd that I even forewarned him, “Humpty, my time here is coming to an end.”

Soon after the incident at Center Stage, Jim Barnett invited me, my wife, and our two boys to lunch at the CNN Center in Atlanta. Jim had never met Jason and Chad, although he had received pictures of them over the years. We had a wonderful lunch, and Jim was very sweet to

the boys, bringing them Atlanta Hawks and Falcons jerseys as gifts. Most of the conversation that day was between Jim and my wife, with Jim telling her, "If Gary would just relax, lay back, and overlook things, he'll end up a very wealthy man with a very good job."

I was sitting right there and he was telling this to my wife. I loved and respected Jim, but I was 47 years old and wasn't about to let some booking committee destroy the legacy that I had built for myself and The Great Muta by allowing him to look weak with no justification. Although I have no animosity towards him now, I have to say, with no disrespect, my old friend Jim Barnett was not a lot of help on my behalf during that time.

Also during this time, the company started running a hotline where each week, certain guys on the roster would spout their opinions and then answer fan mail. Jim Barnett tried to get me to do some recordings for it, but I refused. He begged me, so I told him I would only go on if he went on. Of course, he would never do anything like that, so he reminded me that they pay every guy who does a recording an extra \$200. "Jim," I said, "my gossip is worth a lot more than \$200."

Jim Cornette and Jim Ross were on the hotline all the time. They made a lot of money doing it, but I wouldn't do it. I hated the whole concept of the wrestling hotline, and felt it was just a way to rip-off the fans. Jim Barnett kept pestering me, so I finally had to tell him, "I'm Gary Hart. People pay to see me. Who are you trying to turn me into – the guy next door who anyone can have a beer with? How can I be mysterious and special if I sit down every week and answer the company's fan mail on a hotline? I'm sorry, but I cannot allow you to bastardize me to that point."

Eventually, it got to the point where some of my "friends" on the booking committee started painting me as a trouble maker and as a guy who was very difficult to deal with. I have since forgiven them - because they were just afraid of not getting their contract extensions and didn't want to rock the boat. And if I hadn't been fired so many times, I probably would have been scared, too. However, I was Gary Hart and they weren't, and getting fired over something I believed in was a price I was willing to pay. It was becoming clear that I couldn't be a part of their silliness and incompetent booking, and that they weren't interested in my ideas. I always used the power of persuasion, but when I was talking to idiots, the power of persuasion was meaningless. I could be logical and factual, but people with the mindset of Jim Herd and his associates could not be reasoned with. By that point, I knew that I was no longer a part of Jim Herd's long-term agenda, but at the same time, I don't suffer fools gladly.

Because we were owned by Turner, the office told everyone that they had to move to Atlanta. The only exception was that if anyone lived in the Carolinas, they could remain there. Therefore, since I had a place in Daytona, my family had to move to Atlanta. I got a suite on a top floor of a Howard Johnson's in Atlanta, and enrolled my children in private school. I didn't really feel comfortable getting a house, because I knew in my heart that my tenure in the NWA wasn't going to last much longer.

Eventually, the booking committee was disbanded - because the whole concept was just not capable of working out. There was too much infighting, and they were all consumed with

taking care of their own interests. From what I could tell, the only thing that the booking committee was successfully able to do was give themselves days off and make sure they never got bumped off an airline.

Ric Flair was then announced as our new booker. What qualified Ric as a booker? A four-month stint on a failed booking committee? The booker for the NWA was responsible for fifty-five guys and for planning Clashes, Bashes, and Starrcades, among many other things. What made Jim Herd think that as great an in-ring performer and World Champion Ric was, that in addition to that, he could supervise everyone else on the roster? Besides, Ric Flair had no chance of success as a booker because he had no formal training. Before I was a booker, I was Bill Watts' assistant and Jim Barnett's de facto assistant. When I got the book in Georgia in 1975, I knew how to produce TV's without even knowing I knew. Just by doing it over and over on a weekly basis in Florida I had developed a feel for it. I had a long time to develop into the booker I became. It didn't happen overnight - or over four months, either.

For Starrcade '89, Ric Flair and his minions came up with an Iron Man tournament concept, in which Ric, Sting, Lex Luger, and The Great Muta would wrestle each other three times each. It was such a great idea that the Omni in Atlanta was less than half full that night - and this was for Starrcade, mind you.

Think about that: 6,000 people for the biggest show of the year. If I had gotten 6,000 people for one of our regular shows at the Omni when I booked for Jim Barnett, he would have fired me on the spot and never used me again!

When Ric had determined the finishes for Starrcade, referee Nick Patrick came to me, saying, "Gary, I have the finishes for Starrcade. Sting is going over The Great Muta, then Ric is going over The Great Muta..."

I wasn't angry with the messenger, because I was friends with Nick and his dad, Jody Hamilton, but I stopped him right there and sarcastically asked, "Since Ric wants The Great Muta to be beaten twice - why don't we just beat him all three times and completely destroy his winning streak?"

Of course, once that suggestion got back to Ric, he thought it was great. That's why The Great Muta did three jobs in a row on pay-per-view for Starrcade '89. Ric Flair took The Great Muta - who had become a huge attraction, was undefeated, and who had helped draw big money for the company - and treated him like a jobber at Starrcade - for which Ric's Iron Man idea couldn't even draw half a house. And I should pay attention and listen to him?

In that one night, Ric Flair destroyed any credibility that The Great Muta had in the fans eyes.

Following Starrcade, we worked twice on Christmas day: Greenville, South Carolina in the afternoon, and Charlotte, North Carolina at night. Terry Funk, The Great Muta, and I left by car Christmas morning from Atlanta, and drove to Greenville for the afternoon show. Terry was with us because even though he had "retired" from the ring, he still had an on-air role. After the

matches in Greenville, we jumped back in the car and drove to Charlotte. By the time we got there, however, we were famished, and on Christmas day in Charlotte, there's nothing open. The three of us drove around and finally found the one Chinese restaurant open in all of Charlotte, so we went in and had something to eat. We were on last, so we stayed and had a nice dinner. We got to the arena thirty-five minutes late - long before any of us had to get into the ring. As we walked into the dressing room, Ric Flair, our esteemed booker and World Champion rolled into one, looked at his watch and barked, "You're late!"

As the room got eerily quiet, I just looked at him and asked, "Ric, did I ever treat you the way you're treating me when you worked for me in Texas? If I did, I'm very sorry, and please accept my apologies for being late."

I turned around and walked out of the dressing room, while Ric dropped his head in embarrassment - because he knew I was right.

If I had ever treated Ric Flair like that when I was booker, then I'm sorry. However, I cannot recall one instance where I ever pulled anything like that on him. I wasn't traditionally a late guy, I had to eat, it was Christmas day, and we were working two shows. Ric lived in Charlotte, and left from home that morning. He probably had a big breakfast and a big lunch before he came to the arena, but Terry, The Great Muta, and I were eating chips from a gas station.

I was the guy who, back in the early 80's, called every office and anyone in a power position in the NWA to encourage them to keep the belt on Ric Flair because he was doing such good business for me in Texas. I sang Ric's praises to any promoter that would listen - and don't think that was no big deal back then. Harley Race and Dusty Rhodes were campaigning hard to get the belt back from Ric. They both got it for a little while, but I was one of the few guys outside of the Carolinas that stood for Ric Flair and stood hard. Even though I made a lot of money with Ric over the years - and always had a good time with him - I feel that the way he treated me that day was very demeaning to me and demeaning to our friendship.

During this time, interest in The Great Muta in his native Japan was piquing. Antonio Inoki, Masa Saito, and Seiji Sakaguchi of New Japan Wrestling flew to Atlanta and personally thanked me for the help that I had given to The Great Muta. They also said that they wanted to repay me, and that when the time was right, they would like to bring me and The Great Muta to Japan to work with Ric Flair. I was honored, and told them, "Thank you very much. I would love to go Japan. I truly enjoy doing what I do for The Great Muta."

Soon after, I was contacted by officials from New Japan for my passport, was informed that I would be managing The Great Muta when he wrestled Ric Flair in the Tokyo Dome, and that The Great Muta and I would be paid \$10,000 apiece. This was going to be The Great Muta's grand debut in Japan, and it was going to be a big deal. I even took The Great Muta to Canada so he could get his proper visa for the return trip. However, as the date drew closer, Jim Herd decided to pull Ric Flair from the show. Once he did that, The Great Muta got cold feet.

"Gary-son, if Ric doesn't go, then maybe we no go, either."

I tried to explain that he was a big attraction in Japan, and that no matter who he was booked against, it would be a big deal. The Great Muta wasn't worried about his opponent, though - he was more concerned about his contractual obligation to the NWA, and what they would think if he took the booking. Once again, I was reminded that the Japanese loyalty is to the company rather than to the man who gave him his gimmick. It was a harsh lesson I originally learned with The Great Kabuki, and just like it ended things with The Great Kabuki - my relationship with The Great Muta ended over that experience, as well. It was unfortunate, but I only trust people until they prove themselves to be untrustworthy. Once they do - I never look at them the same again, and I never trust them again - no matter how many apologies they give me. Screw me once - shame on you. Screw me twice - shame on me. And to this day there isn't any shame on me. I would never allow that.

However, one must wonder why - if my influence over The Great Muta was so great as Dave Meltzer would lead people to believe - I couldn't "convince him" to take that date in Japan?

So what happened to The Great Muta in the NWA when we split up? Within a matter of weeks, he dropped his TV Title and got lost in the shuffle. The Great Muta - the #1 attraction and marquee name for the NWA - within weeks of being on his own meant nothing in the United States. Why did The Great Muta die in North America without me in his corner? Because he didn't have me there telling him when to get some heat or to quit selling so much. It's a very hard process and very difficult to develop a wrestler. It looks so easy and so smooth - but it's not. Of course, there always comes a time when a guy understands who he has become - but The Great Muta wasn't at that point yet. He was just not capable of standing up for himself, and immediately went back to his White Ninja mentality when we split up. That's why when I created a gimmick or attraction, I didn't want outsiders with their noses involved - because they didn't understand it or know what it was, and I knew that if they tried to get involved - they would mess it up.

Of course, the Great Muta eventually left the United States and became a huge sensation in Japan. Regardless of the way things ended between us, I'm very proud of him - just as I am with The Great Kabuki. Before I hooked up with them they were opening matches around the country, and I single-handedly developed the both of them into huge box office attractions in America. Today, The Great Muta and The Great Kabuki are legends throughout the world, and they are the two wrestlers that I am most proud of. However, as powerful as they are in Japan, neither one of them has ever offered me a deal over there - and I know they never will. Recently, though, a Japanese television production crew came to interview me for The 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of The Great Kabuki's creation and the 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of The Great Muta's creation, and they spent three days with me discussing how I developed and created them.

Everyone in the NWA was stunned when Jim Herd did an interview with The New York Times, in which he admitted that professional wrestling was pre-determined. Once he got wind that his crew wasn't happy being referred to as basically a bunch of "fakers" and "phonies," he tried to appease us by sending pizza and beer to our dressing room in Hartford, Connecticut, before our matches. A couple of guys got up to go get the pizza and beer, but Hawk of The Road

Warriors stood up and declared, “Anyone who takes one bite of pizza or opens one can of beer - I will personally kick your butt.”

When we left after the matches, the pizza and beer weren’t touched.

I had gotten into a situation several months back when I was managing Terry Funk. We were in Baltimore, Maryland, and after a match with Ric Flair, Terry and I were going back to the dressing room when two rowdy fans tried to reach over and grab Terry. I had a towel with me, so I smacked the towel on them. When I got to the back, I asked a police officer to eject the two men from the building, because I was smart enough to know that if they tried to complain about what I did, it would be on record that they were thrown out for disorderly conduct. They were thrown out, but for some reason, Gary Juster - who promoted Landover, Baltimore, and Philadelphia - let them back into the building. Then, because of the “towel incident,” the two guys sued the company.

Jim Herd called me into his office and informed me that the Turner legal team felt that the best way for them to get out of the lawsuit was for me to testify under oath that wrestling was a “total sham” and all pre-planned. When he told me that, I told him, “I have drawn money all over the world. I have booked and produced major TV shows and run major arenas, yet you have not once come to me for my opinion. You don’t know who I am, and on top of that, you don’t even care. Now you want me to go into a court of law, put my hand on a Bible, and expose a business that I’ve been in for thirty years just so you can get out from under a lawsuit?”

He proudly held up The New York Times article on his desk, and exclaimed, “Well I admitted it’s pre-determined!”

“Well I’m Gary Hart and you’re not,” I replied. “So you can kiss my ass and go to hell. I’m going home to Texas.”

That’s how I left the NWA, and that was the demise of Gary Hart in big-time wrestling.

I didn’t care that the dirtsheets were exposing the business on a weekly basis, and I didn’t care that Jim Herd exposed the business in The New York Times. Gary Hart was not going to expose the business. It was engrained in my head from all of the guys who told me as I was coming up, “Gary, if you take care of the business, the business will take care of you.”

Rule number one was - above all else - to protect the business - and only a rat would break that rule. People might think that I was trying to keep the horse in the barn after it had already escaped, but I knew that people were aware that wrestling was not on the up and up, and never kidded myself. However, my attitude was, “You’re not going to hear it from me.”

If I had been just starting out at that time - when wrestling was transitioning into sports entertainment - I could have made those statements. However, I was involved in the business since 1958, and could not bring myself to expose it. No amount of money could have made me do it, either. Between that and torture, I would have chosen torture. It’s like what I told Jim Barnett many years ago in Australia, “You’re paying for my body, not my soul.”

My soul was in wrestling, and I couldn't betray my soul.

I left and have no idea what happened with the lawsuit. They probably settled for a ridiculous amount of money, when they could have given those guys a dinner with Ric Flair and tickets for a year - but Jim Herd wasn't smart enough to think of that. He also wasn't smart enough to look at The Iron Sheik's contract and realize that he had to warn him three months before he fired him or the NWA would owe him \$600,000. I've said it before but it bears repeating: Jim Herd paid The Iron Sheik \$600,000 for fifty matches. That's who I was dealing with, and I could no longer accept the incompetence of Jim Herd.

Jim Herd was a manager of a television station in the 60's that played a tape with which he had nothing to do with making. Then, he worked as an executive in the food industry. If I sat down with him to discuss the management of television stations, I could have learned a lot. If I wanted to learn how to market a fast food chain, I could have picked his brain. However, I could learn nothing from him about the wrestling business. He presumed he had a clue, but he didn't. He was arrogant and dumb enough to walk around like he was doing a great job while the company was falling apart. He had no knowledge of wrestling - which the world knows by now, but I knew it immediately - and I am proud to say that I was the first one to tell the suits at Turner Sports to kiss my lily-white ass.



# Chapter 58: Texas Wrestling Federation

I looked at leaving the NWA as a new opportunity for me, and as a new beginning. I never worried about where my next paycheck would come from or wondered what I would do next, because I live my life - especially since the plane crash - one day at a time. I also knew from experience that when one door closes, another one opens. Besides, I had been really busy and on the road for a long time, and I had some money saved up. My oldest son was twelve and my youngest was ten, and I just wanted to have a good time with them.

Sadly, after moving my family back to Dallas, my wife and I started having problems. To put it bluntly, she was very disappointed that I didn't listen to Jim Barnett's advice to try and get along with Jim Herd, Ric Flair, and the NWA booking committee, and felt that I put the family in financial straits by not doing what Jim suggested I do. Needless to say, I didn't see things quite that way. Yes, we were going to have to adjust our lifestyle because no longer would we have a lot of money coming in on a regular basis, but I was more than prepared to make that sacrifice. Unfortunately, she wasn't, and was constantly after me to "go back and do what they want you to do."

I never messed around on my wife and I wasn't a liar, cheater, conniver, drinker, woman chaser, or a gambler. For well over twenty years of my life I was just a devoted husband and family man. I lived that way because I felt that morally it was the right way to be - and because that's the way I was raised by my Grammy. However, I also had principles and self-respect, and never entertained for one second the thought of going back to Jim Herd and groveling for my job back. Because of that impasse, my wife and I eventually divorced.

Shortly after arriving back in Dallas, I received a call from Matt Borne. He said, "Gary, I was over at the Metroplex Arena the other night, and the manager of the building would like you to call him. His name is Rodney Cooper."

Naturally, I was curious as to what it was all about, so I gave Rodney a call. He asked if I would come into his office and meet with him about a "business opportunity" – so I agreed. I met with Rodney, and he gave me a tour of the Metroplex, which was a big warehouse turned into an entertainment complex in northern Dallas. He told me that the people who were fronting it were in the commodities market and were making more money than they could spend. For events, the Metroplex could sit 1,400 people, and it had a lovely bar with a big screen to air pay-per-view events. At the time, the Metroplex held events such as rock concerts, roller derby, boxing matches, and what I would loosely call wrestling. Rodney then offered me the job of the Events Director for the Metroplex – in which I would be responsible for booking the aforementioned activities. We came to terms on a deal, and I happily accepted the position.

Concerts were a staple of the Metroplex, and we would bring in old rock & roll acts like The Coasters, The Temptations, and The Drifters. I really enjoyed that. The only acts I didn't like booking were the heavy metal bands and the rap artists - because I couldn't handle the noise. Roller derby was something I knew nothing about. I used to watch it as a kid and I enjoyed it, but

that was about it. Ernest Wilkerson, aka Whitebread Johnson, was a roller derby official who really helped me out with all the particulars for booking those shows. I really enjoyed running the boxing cards, because I'm a huge boxing fan, and always have been. I actually used to listen to the Friday Night Fights with my Uncle Butterball on the radio.

When I first assumed my duties with the Metroplex, they had some real bad wrestling. It was horrible - with guys not even out of wrestling schools. Plus - the guys who were training them to wrestle had never even made their living wrestling! I immediately canceled the shows that had been running, and created my own wrestling organization: The Texas Wrestling Federation.

To fill out the roster, I brought in professional wrestlers like Chris Adams, Abdullah the Butcher, Al Perez, Terry Gordy, Tim Brooks, Kendo Nagasaki, Eric Embry, Iceman King Parsons, Matt Borne, and Steve Austin - who at the time was just a young wrestler that Chris Adams was training. I had a great crew of guys, and ran wrestling shows every Sunday night. I even got the TWF a timeslot on channel 27 in Texas, and made a syndication deal for it to air throughout the Caribbean!

There were absolutely no hard feelings from the way things ended between me and Al Perez in the NWA, and I happily made him the TWF Champion - a role in which he did a great job in. These days, a lot of people claim to have seen the talent and tremendous potential in a young Steve Austin, but when I say it, I have the proof to back it up. I'm proud to say that I was the first person who ever put a belt on Steve Austin, when he - along with Rod Price - won the TWF Tag Team Title. His talent was so obvious, though. When Steve was working for me, I would always tell him that he had to make tapes of himself and send them to the WWF and WCW. You would think that I would tell him to stay with me forever, and that I would make him rich - but I wasn't that way. I saw immediately that he could have a great career in wrestling, assured him he was ready for the next step, and encouraged him to take advantage of any opportunity he had.

I appointed Johnny Valentine as my Commissioner, because I wanted to get him out of the house and around wrestling again. He would go down the aisle on his crutches and really lay down the law. He was a man's man who marched to the beat of his own drum, and I was thrilled to work with him again. I never saw a man take to a disability the way Johnny Valentine did. He fought it every day in every way, and never once asked, "Why me?" or tried to get sympathy. He handled it miraculously until the last day of his life.

Even though I was a big name in wrestling, and had just come off a high profile run on TBS, I didn't put myself in front of the camera for the TWF shows. I was strictly behind the scenes. At that stage of my career, I wanted to take myself completely out of the picture and produce the very best television show I could. Being an on air player was secondary to the satisfaction I had when I would watch the show - knowing everything went the way I wanted it to or better - and see how it affected the fans. I simply wanted to run the best wrestling promotion I could and bring in the best talent I could afford. Plus, staying behind the scenes allowed me more time to focus on and develop and create young talent. That was my great joy

and passion - finding a young guy and giving him a hand up. By doing that, I was - in my own way - paying back what was done for me by Billy Goetz, Bert Ruby, and Dory Funk, Sr.

During this time, I was still continuing my job at the Metroplex, and was having a really good time with it. You would think that the most important thing to me was the TWF - but it wasn't. I took the roller derby, the concerts, and the boxing just as seriously.

Ironically, at that time, there were two groups running in Texas: My TWF and Jerry Jarrett's USWA promotion. I never looked at Jarrett as competition, though. I looked at him like a failing concern. Not only were my ratings doing better than his, but Jerry's ratings were so poor that he actually lost KTVT - which had been the flagship station for Texas wrestling since 1952! Shortly after that happened, Kevin Von Erich called me up one Friday evening, saying, "Uncle Gary, I'm having some problems. I'm not receiving any dividend checks from Jerry Jarrett. Would you mind doing me a big favor and stop by the Sportatorium before our taping tonight?"

Even though Kevin was still affiliated with USWA - "the opposition" - he told me that if I did him this favor, he would take some dates for TWF. If Kevin needed me, I was there. And since his problem was with Jerry Jarrett - he came to the right man.

When I arrived at the Sportatorium, I went upstairs to Fritz's office, and there was Kevin along with his attorney, Grey Pierson. Also in the room was a judge from Dallas county and a Dallas city councilman named Al Lipscomb. Between the five of us, Kevin had all the power he needed to confront the USWA representatives over the money he was owed. His lawyer was there to make sure things went smoothly, the judge was there to freeze the USWA assets should they refuse to pay him, Al Lipscomb was there as a reputable witness, and I was the insurance policy to show them that if they left and refused to run the card that night, I could round up my TWF talent and produce a quality show for Kevin that very night.

Jeff Jarrett and Bill Dundee walked into the office, and when they saw me - looked stunned. They came into the meeting thinking they had all the power, because if Kevin demanded the money, they could take the talent back to Tennessee and cancel the TV taping, but my mere appearance showed them that after all these years, Kevin Von Erich and Gary Hart - the promoter and booker of the TWF - were still tight.

I had never met Jeff Jarrett before, but he seemed like a nice kid, and I said hello to him. I never held children guilty of their father's sins. I wasn't that kind of guy, and I hope that no one holds my sons accountable for my sins, either. I also spent a few minutes talking with Bill Dundee - who I knew from my days in Australia - and asked him if everything would be alright. He assured me it would.

Sure enough, they gave Kevin his money that very night. I was happy to have been there for Kevin, and he was good on his word, fulfilling his commitment to work for the Texas Wrestling Federation.

Having Kevin Von Erich with the TWF was a big plus. A lot of times when I was promoting the TWF, the first question fans would ask me was if I was bringing in the Von Erich's. Even though I had Kevin, he wasn't interested in wrestling that much, and Kerry was with the WWF at the time, so I started booking their younger brother Chris on my shows.

Chris Von Erich was a Godsend to me. With Chris, I had an authentic Von Erich on the card, and in Texas - that was a big plus. He really helped me out, because anytime I had him on the card, I had a better chance of getting people in the building. While he clearly wasn't Kevin, David, or Kerry - he really wanted to wrestle, and the inevitable comparisons to his brothers were very hard on him. I would often tell him, "You are Chris Von Erich, your own man. You just go out there and be the best Chris Von Erich that you can be. You don't have to be Fritz, Kevin, David, Kerry, or Mike. Just be yourself."

He was a decent worker and gave everything he had in the ring. He was in good condition, trained as hard as he could, and I was always pleased with him. Whenever I booked him, I put him with guys similar to his size, and used him as a light heavyweight. I had him booked for a show at the Cowbell Arena right outside Fort Worth one night, but when he showed up at the matches, his arm was in a cast and he couldn't wrestle. Chris had real bad asthma, and over the years, using the inhalants had softened his bones, and he had a tendency to get hairline fractures. He told me how sorry he was that he had to cancel, and I told him not to worry about it. I also told him that when his arm healed up, he should give me a call, and we would get back in the swing of things. The following week on my way home from the Metroplex, I was turning the radio dial when I heard, "...Von Erich was found dead in his car."

I only heard the tail end, so I didn't know who they were talking about. I raced home and put on the news, and learned that it was Chris. He had gone to the back of his father's ranch, put a gun to his head, pulled the trigger, and ended his life. It was so unexpected, because he was such a delightful child. I knew Chris his entire life - even working with his father the night he was born - and he was always so nice, polite, religious, and giving. He wasn't selfish or greedy at all. He was very much like his mother, in that he had humanity for other people, and realized that he had a blessed life. Unfortunately, though, he also felt inadequate, and didn't really know what he wanted out of life.

Even though I don't do funerals, Whitebread insisted I go to Chris'. I'm not good at things like that, though, especially when I'm emotionally attached to someone. People seem to find it hard to believe that I'm so fond of the Von Erich's, because that's not the Gary Hart they saw. They saw a cold blooded dude that was evil and hateful towards the entire family. Yes, that's the way I was in wrestling, and that's how I treated them on TV, but those boys were very close to me - and became like my family, because they grew up before my eyes.

I went to the church, but not the gravesite. I sat in the very last pew right by the door, and saw Fritz up front. As I was sitting there, Kevin brought his mother in, and as they walked down the aisle, she stumbled and nearly went down. She was just grief stricken, because four of her children had been taken from her. That's a very bad memory for me. After the service, Chris's coffin was being put in the hearse, and as Kevin and Kerry were just standing on the steps watching, Whitebread and I went over and talked to them. We didn't say much, though. We all

knew how we felt. There was a young kid who had just chosen death over life, and there was sadness all around.

Shortly afterwards, I was talking to Curtis Iaukea about Chris, and he said, "He's where he wants to be. He made the choice, and maybe he knows better than us."

I tend to look at Chris's situation like that just to shield me from trying to figure out why - although I don't know that anyone could.

# Chapter 59: Global Wrestling Federation

One day, I was in my office at the Metroplex, and in waddled big, fat Joe Pedicino. He used to have a rinky-dink wrestling show in Atlanta, and Jimmy Crockett never wanted anything to do with him. Joe had no scruples or knowledge of wrestling, and flim-flamed people to believe he was somebody. He was in Texas because Jerry Jarrett's USWA had closed its Dallas office, and Joe was looking to start up his own promotion in the area. Joe asked if his new promotion – which he would call the Global Wrestling Federation – could start a “working relationship” with the TWF. When he said, “I know that you didn't have a good relationship with Jerry Jarrett...” I cut him off right there and told him, “I never had any relationship with that hillbilly Jerry Jarrett - and I want no relationship with you, either. Just run your promotion the best you can, and if you can use any of my talent, please do. I like it whenever they can make an extra payoff. Now, as far as you and me doing business together? The only business that I would even consider doing with you is if you wanted to buy commercial time on my show. It's \$75 for a thirty second spot. Otherwise – beat it.”

As you can see - I had an aversion to Joe Pedicino.

Sometime after that, the commodities market fell on hard times, and the backers of the Metroplex lost their lease on the building. That not only put an end to my tenure as Events Director, but it also put an end to my promotion, the Texas Wrestling Federation. Around the time the TWF officially shut down, Joe Pedicino sold his GWF promotion to Grey Pierson, who was Kevin Von Erich's attorney. Grey approached me about being his consultant, and I agreed to help behind the scenes in any way I could. At that point, the GWF was the only Texas promotion in existence, and I felt it was important that independent Texas wrestlers - and there were a lot of them - had a good, safe place to work and learn their craft.

By 1992, the GWF had a good crew of guys, like Chris Adams, Al Perez, Black Bart, Eddie Gilbert, Terry Gordy, Jimmy Garvin, Buddy Landel, and Sam Houston. I was pleased to see that there were some big names being used to draw the fans in, but me being me, I was drawn to any young talent that I saw something special in. For example, when John Layfield first walked into the dressing room and I saw him, I told him, “If I was twenty years younger, I would come out of retirement, and you and I would make a fortune together.”

With John, I just knew he had “it” by looking him. A guy like me can literally see that when they walk through the door. I also knew his tag team partner, Bobby Duncum, Jr., very well, because I had managed his father. John, Bobby, and I made a lot of trips throughout Texas together. One time, we went from Halogen to Laredo, and on the way there we stole watermelons out of the fields, and on the way back we stole honeydews and cantaloupe. They drank a lot of beer, I smoked a lot of pot, and we always had a good time. I was very encouraging to both John and Bobby, and knew that they had bright futures ahead of them. Whenever I was with a young guy and I knew there were bigger and better things out there for them, I would encourage them to go and do well. Why wait? Of course, John went on to have a great career in the WWF as JBL, and Bobby, unfortunately, died of a prescription drug problem while wrestling for WCW. That was very sad.

One evening, I went to an independent show in Houston to scout talent with Tim Brooks, and I saw a brother tag team called The Ebony Experience - Booker T and Stevie Ray. When I got back to Dallas, I advised Grey, "These two guys are going to be really good, and we have to bring them in and feature them."

Grey wanted me to manage them, and even though that wasn't part of my deal - and I really wanted to focus on behind the scenes activities - I agreed to return to managing. I did it because I really liked Booker T and Stevie Ray, thought they had something to offer, and felt that if having me as their manager would bring them a little credibility, how could I deny them that?

After their debut in GWF, Grey thought it would be a great idea to put The Ebony Experience in a program with The Youngbloods - who were Ricky Romero's kids. Ricky and I always had a nice relationship, and I would do anything I could to help his two boys get over, but when Grey suggested that feud to me, I had to sit down with him.

"There are opponents here for the Youngbloods, but not The Ebony Experience," I explained to Grey. "Booker T and Stevie Ray look like they could kill anyone they encounter, and The Youngbloods are two flabby little kids. You want the people to buy this as a continuing feud? It's not even in the realm of possibility!"

However, Grey insisted the feud should go on - so it did. From that moment on, I was on Booker T and Stevie Ray's case, telling them to send a tape to the WWF and WCW. I made it very clear to them that in anything they send out, they should keep my name off of - especially to Atlanta, because as far as the office would be concerned, having me as their manager might be more of a hindrance than a help. They took my advice, sent tapes to both places, and got hired in WCW as Harlem Heat.

Grey then created this character named Sebastian, whose gimmick was that he was obsessed with me. The pathetic thing was that Sebastian was a direct rip-off from the WWF, and a character of theirs named Jamison. That was Grey Pierson's thought process: If the WWF has a character like that, then we should, as well. It was like being back with Jim Herd. Grey Pierson is a great attorney, and got a lot of money for a lot of people, but he didn't have a clue about wrestling, because he was a wrestling fan.

Now - I'm not down on wrestling fans, but fans don't know what they want. They shouldn't know. That's not their job. Their job is to come and be entertained - and hopefully be tricked - so they're elated with adrenaline rushing through their body. People with no background in wrestling other than a fan's point of view think that anyone can run a wrestling promotion, but the proven fact is that very few know how to run successful wrestling organizations.

By the end of 1992, I felt very uncomfortable in the GWF. Grey was just giving out free tickets and wasn't interested in doing what was right for business. It was as if Grey was playing

wrestling promoter. It eventually got to the point where the GWF wasn't something that I wanted my name associated with anymore.

To finish my run in the GWF, I got involved in an angle at the Sportatorium where Skandor Akbar and his guys were attacking Kerry Von Erich, who had just finished up his run in the WWF. I jumped in the ring and made the save for Kerry. He and I then hugged, and the people went nuts.

And that was it - the end of my run.

After Kerry and I did that angle, we spent some time together in Fritz's old office. That's where Kerry would dress whenever he worked the Sportatorium. We talked about the personal problems he was currently going through, as well as his ongoing struggles. It was clear to me that Kerry was lost in every way. He had lost some of his energy, and his smile wasn't as quick as it used to be. I was as supportive as I could be, and reminded him that he was a strong guy, who could overcome anything. We had a really nice visit, and as I was leaving, I said, "I'll see you when I see you, man."

He replied, "Goodbye, Uncle Gary."

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# Chapter 60: Kerry and Fritz

A couple of months after I left the GWF, I was watching TV, and it popped up on the news: “The Von Erich tragedy hits again.”

All three networks in Dallas were covering it. Kerry Von Erich had committed suicide.

Kerry had been going through a lot of legal problems, wasn't thinking clearly, and never had that moment of clarity that one is supposed to have – realizing that he seriously needed help. When he couldn't find a doctor who would prescribe him drugs, he stole some prescription pads and wrote his own. That's how lost he was. Then, when it was looking like he was going to have to serve some prison time, Kerry decided to end it all.

Fritz had a fifty acre ranch with about twenty cows on the property. It was a place where the boys used to go and play as children. There was a great big sycamore tree that must be more than one-hundred years old. It's one of those huge, gothic trees. It was the boys' favorite tree, and was a quarter of a mile from the ranch house. On that day, Kerry told his dad he was going to go by the tree and do some target practice, so Fritz went to make something for him to eat and told him to be back soon. After waiting for a while, it got to be dark, so Fritz jumped on his tractor and went looking for the truck. When he pulled up to the truck, he could see Kerry sitting in an upright position under the tree where he and his brothers used to play. He had put a gun to his heart and pulled the trigger, and his poor father found him there.

This was the fifth Von Erich boy to die – and the third to have killed himself. I just couldn't understand the continuous cycle of suicides, so I did some research and learned that if suicide is in a family's history - even a generation removed - then that family is more apt to look at suicide as an alternative to life. Therefore, when life got too difficult, and the burden to carry on became too much, it really wasn't all that unusual for Kerry to have made the choice he did. I don't think that he rationally understood what impact his death would have on those that truly loved and cared about him, even though he himself had been affected by suicide.

It's very easy for people to say that Kerry Von Erich was a “spoiled drug addict” and a “screw up,” but by doing that, they fail to see that he was simply someone who got in trouble and didn't get the help he needed to get out of it. I truly, in my heart of hearts, believe that.

Addiction has no prejudices at all. Anyone that gets involved in drug addiction will lose. It will take your soul. I don't care if it's prescription medication, cocaine, crack, meth, heroin, or alcohol - once you give yourself up to an addiction, your life is all downhill. The sad thing is, as you get further down that hill, you find that you're farther away from the people that care the most about you.

For some morbid reason, I figured out the space between the deaths of David, Mike, Chris, and Kerry, and it was amazing. It was an average of every three years.

And we can't forget about Jack, Jr. Fritz and I talked about him often during the 70's. After David's death, he really started talking about him, and after Mike died - Fritz and I had some very long conversations about Jack, Jr. It takes someone far stronger than me to comprehend how one survives when you have six children, then four of them go in mysterious circumstances and another dies in a horrible accident.

It makes me mad when I hear people say that Fritz Von Erich is responsible for what happened to his other children by "pressuring them" to go into wrestling. Believe me - those boys wanted it from when they were kids. They used to tell me that they were going to wrestle me when they grew up.

There are so many myths about the Von Erich family. I know people enjoy it and love the dirt, but I have a deep hurt, and don't have time for a lot of that nonsense. I've heard all the rumors, innuendo, and outright lies about them, but the people who make those accusations weren't there - I was.

Over the years, I have read many autobiographies from various wrestlers, and so many of them have devoted a page or two in order to spread salacious gossip about the Von Erich family, get down on the boys, and make their judgments be known. The hypocritical thing about that is that in ninety percent of those cases - the wrestler writing the book could just as easily have spent a page or two knocking their own kids and the way they led their lives - but they don't. They're too busy casting aspersions and getting their pointless cheap-shots in on the Von Erich children. Other wrestlers seem to love using sleazy stories about the Von Erich family to their advantage, but they never seem to want to look in their own closet, do they?

And if the Von Erich boys were "nothing but unreliable drug addicts" - as so many revisionist historians would have us believe - would somebody please explain to me how they drew so much money for so long - not only in Texas, but in St. Louis, Japan, and a host of other places, as well?

I had been close to the Von Erich family since 1966, and no one saw the grief and heartache better than I did. I witnessed firsthand the destruction of a good family, and watched all of the kids who called me Uncle Gary die one-by-one. By writing this book, I hope I have given you a different perspective on who the Von Eric boys were - and how they weren't just a bunch of "drugged-out guys." Yes, they had problems, but I tried to go beyond that and give you some insight into what I saw, and hopefully clear up all of those myths.

The constant deaths eventually destroyed Fritz and Doris's marriage. When you lose five kids, who are you going to blame? Doris blamed Fritz, and Fritz blamed Doris. Eventually, it got to a point where just looking at each other brought back too many painful memories, so after being married for over forty years, they split up. She and Fritz had a wonderful life together until the tragedies started happening. They truly lived the American dream. Somehow, for some reason, it all went bad.

At some point, Fritz got sick with cancer, and tried to fight a little bit. However, after a couple of chemo sessions, he told Kevin he wanted no more, and just wanted to go back to his

ranch house. Even though Fritz was a very wealthy man, he chose to be in a little three room ranch house. That was very typical of Fritz, and he went back to the ranch house that he loved in north central Texas, where at night he could see every star in the sky. Kevin got him round the clock nurses and made sure he was medicated and in as little pain as possible. From what I heard, he even started smoking marijuana to ease his pain. Maybe if Fritz would have smoked pot with me way back when - when he was so much against it - we might have gotten along a lot better.

I never made contact with Fritz after I left World Class in March 1988. After Fritz was diagnosed with cancer, Karl Kox asked me if I wanted to go see him, but I didn't think it would have been a good idea. If I went, Fritz and I would have just ended up in an argument over something that happened twenty years ago. I didn't want to get involved in that, and besides, I'm just not good in those situations.

However, I did stay in touch with Kevin, and let him know that I was aware of the situation. I also assured him that if there was anything I could do - short of going up there - I would be more than happy to do it. The important thing was that I knew Fritz was well taken care of and provided for, and that he was surrounded by his son and his grandchildren.

From all indications that I got from Kevin, Fritz died very peacefully. Even though he was seriously ill with cancer, I truly believe it was the pure agony of his life that did Fritz Von Erich in. Even though he smoked 780 packs of cigarettes a day, and his cancer was legit, the emotional pain became more than he could bear, and he simply lost the will to live.

He had enough money to get the very best medical care and all kinds of different cancer treatments, and he could have prolonged his life for a number of years. Danny Plechas lived with colon cancer for six years. If Fritz wanted life to go on, he had the financial resources to fight as hard and as long as he could, but it just got to the point where life wasn't worth living, and he died two months after being diagnosed. In the end, Fritz died the way he lived: On his own terms. He chose not to fight it, and I have to respect that.

Fritz and I could never have been described as friends. Business colleagues would be a better way to describe us. Basically, what you saw on TV was our relationship. Did we hate each other? No. Did we have things in common? No. Fritz was a guy that liked to hunt, fish, and live the outdoor life. If I wasn't devoting myself to my two children, my head was in the wrestling business. Fritz and I had nothing in common other than wrestling. I was only at Fritz's house twice - and both times were to discuss me taking the booking job for his wrestling office.

Fritz and I were good for each other, though. We were both strong headed, we both had grand ideas, large egos and opinions, and on some occasions we clashed over direction and how things should go - but in the end, we worked well together. At times we liked each other, but at other times we couldn't stand to look at each others face.

That divide between Fritz and I, in reflection, was the reason that World Class fell apart. The two of us were instrumental in putting it together and making it work in 1981, and once we split up for good in 1988 - it collapsed. Even though I was an employee of his - I never looked at my relationship with Fritz as employee/employer. The reason he never really clicked with his

other bookers such as Danny Plechas, Bronko Lubitch, Red Bastien, Ken Mantell, David Manning, George Scott, and Bruiser Brody was because they didn't have the passion to fight him for their beliefs like I did. That's why he and I were so good together for so long, why he kept coming back to me, and why we will always be so closely associated with one another.

Over the years, any kind of resentment over money squabbles Fritz and I had dissipated because, as my son Jason pointed out, "Dad, you only lost a little bit of money. He lost his children."

Jason is right.

# Chapter 61: Chad

In 1993, after leaving the GWF, I started selling wrestling shows. I had connections with all of the Texas talent, so if a group - like a minor league ball club or a race track - was looking to run a wrestling show, they would contact me. I charged \$5,200 for each show, and I would guarantee five matches, a ring, and a ring announcer. They were to provide the venue, and they would get all the concessions.

I sold good shows, and used talent like Kevin Von Erich, Chris Adams, and Terry Gordy. I sold shows in the outlining cities of Dallas and Fort Worth, and tried not to go more than one-hundred miles out. There were a lot of towns out there that I drew money in, and while I didn't get rich - I made a nice living.

You would be surprised how many people contacted me with small bank accounts and big dreams of starting a promotion. Everyone thought their promotion could be the next WWF. They would have \$50,000, and would have spent it if I told them to. Instead, I would talk them out of losing their money. A lot of them, even when I told them not to invest in starting a promotion, would go and find someone else that told them what they wanted to hear. I couldn't do that. I'm not saying I'm holier than thou, but I believe what goes around comes around. There's always someone who will take a marks money - but it won't be me. I can't do that. I love wrestling too much, and have too much respect for it to ever allow anyone to say that I screwed them over. Wrestling gave me a wonderful life, and I would never use my position to scam someone and take their money - but it's done everyday.

One of the biggest scams is wrestling schools. Anyone who has a wrestling school and has deliberately sold dreams to someone who clearly doesn't have a chance should burn in hell. Those kids get hurt just like the wrestlers who make a living at it, and when they get older they'll be crippled, and all they'll know is that they hate wrestling and wrestling cheated them out of their dreams.

Wrestling didn't cheat them out of a thing. The guy that conned them did.

I am proud to say that I have never had a wrestling school, and will never have any association with one. I wouldn't even stop by to wave, because I know what they are: Dream factories. They take young people, steal their money, promise them stardom, and leave them with nothing. That's as wrong as taking a guy's money who wants to be a promoter. It's wrong and I won't do it. Some of these "schools" have had students for five years, and they're taking them for \$75 a week. Imagine the kind of houses those kids could have saved up for. I can't do stuff like that. It makes me feel dirty. I can do a lot of things, but when it comes to taking advantage of people's dreams, Gary Hart doesn't play that game.

During the late 90's, I started running weekly shows in the Sportatorium, and even had a banner made up that said, "World Class II: The Next Generation." By then, the Sportatorium had fallen in such disrepair that there was nothing else going on there except for my shows. I made it known to the talent that they would be paid based on the draw, and we drew an average of 600

people a week. It was a shoestring budget, and my guys didn't make more than \$50 a night, but everyone always got paid.

During that time, I started teaching my youngest son Chad how to work. I'm sure there are people out there thinking that I forced Chad to go into wrestling, or that I'm trying to "relive my life through him," but that's not true. Chad really wants this. My training Chad at the Sportatorium offered him great opportunities to wrestle guys like Chris Adams, Greg Valentine, Bob Orton, Bill Irwin, and Mike Davis. After a couple of years, I closed the Sportatorium down, and was the last one to ever run a show there. I loved running shows there, and would probably still be in there if it wasn't in such disrepair.

At one point, I felt Chad was ready to get some experience outside of Texas, so I called JJ Dillon at WCW and asked if I could send Chad in to do some jobs - just to get a taste of the big time. Chad flew in to do a WCW TV taping, and like any kid, was nervous and excited, but my old buddy Ric Flair went out of his way to spend fifteen minutes with him, introduce him to his son David, and really make him feel comfortable. Arn Anderson and Kevin Sullivan did the same, and I will always appreciate them for that.

To this day, Chad works for a lot of different independent promotions under the name Chad Hart. At one show he was on, Teddy Hart and Harry Smith from the Hart family out of Calgary seemed annoyed, and told him that he couldn't bill himself as a "Hart." As soon as Chad explained that his father was "Playboy" Gary Hart, their attitudes changes completely.

It's funny. When I chose the name Gary Hart in 1960, I was the only Hart in the states. When I was in Florida, there was another wrestler named Bobby Hart, and I used to ask him, "Which bastard son are you?"

However, by the time I retired, there were guys like Bret Hart, Owen Hart, and Jimmy Hart - and my name was no longer unique. And in the 80's, Senator Gary Hart ran for President and got involved in a huge scandal. That created a whole new meaning for my name, but that's a whole other story...

Chad is so good, though. He's so giving in his matches, and he really loves wrestling. He's 6'3" and 190 pounds naturally. Unfortunately, these days, steroids are a plague in the wrestling business - as bad as pills and cocaine were in the 80's. I would discourage Chad in every way I could from taking any drugs to bulk up. Creatine and protein powders are one thing, but steroids are a whole other ball of wax - because they're deadly.

## Chapter 62: Chris Adams

Even though Chris Adams never had a gigantic career outside of Texas, he did some great things during his run there. He was always looking to get back into the big time, and even sent some pictures to the WWF in hopes of doing a Beatles gimmick - because everyone always told him he looked like Paul McCartney - but it was to no avail. Then, I was watching WCW Nitro one night, and I saw none other than “Gentleman” Chris Adams making his way to the ring. I was so happy for him. He had made it back to the top, and was making \$150,000 a year working minimal dates. Chris then fell in love with a sweet, wonderful girl named Linda, and things were looking really good.

Just as things were going his way, Chris and Linda overdosed on a drug called GHB one night, and while Chris pulled through - Linda died. At that point, Chris went from someone with a bright future to someone with no hope at all. It was like turning out a light. It was clearly an accident, but Chris took responsibility and felt horrible. I talked to him and tried to explain that it wasn't his fault, but he blamed himself - because he really and truly loved Linda.

Chris then wrestled what would be his last match in Mejia, Texas against my son Chad. Before their match, Chad had to help him take out his earrings because he was trembling so hard. Linda's death just completely and totally destroyed him.

As time went by, Chris was indicted for manslaughter. There was a warrant for his arrest, and Chris started running from the law. He had been through other legal problems in his past - but this was manslaughter. At that point, Chris was at the point of no return. He had an alcohol problem, he had financial problems, he had IRS problems, and he had alimony problems with two ex-wives - one of whom was a crack addict. He also had a child, and he had no idea how he was going to take care of her. Fortunately, Kevin Von Erich and his wife took her in for a period of time. Kevin has a good family, and he and his wife are wonderful people.

Tim Brooks was promoting a fundraising show in Waxahachie for the Boys and Girls Club. Chris was out on bail awaiting his trial, and he called me up and asked if I could get him booked on Tim's show in a match against Chad. I asked Tim to book Chris - and assured him I would personally see to it that Chris would show up clean and sober that night. Shortly after Tim booked Chris on the show, the sponsors noticed his name on the poster, and with all the bad press about Chris Adams - the drugs and the manslaughter charges - they asked Tim to take him off the card, feeling that it would be inappropriate to have him on a fundraising show for the Boys and Girls Club. I had to call Chris and explain why he was being taken off the show - and he understood.

That very night that we were having our fundraising show in Waxahachie, Chris was ten miles away hanging out with Boo Ray Parnell. Boo Ray was Chris's roommate and best friend, and is a wonderful, sweet, lovable guy with a heart of gold. That night, they were drinking and doing drugs, and suddenly got into an argument. Chris flipped out, jumped up, started pounding on Boo Ray, and told him that he was going to kill him. Chris then started choking the life out of Boo Ray while biting him all over his face, nose, and ears. Boo Ray then reached over and

grabbed a gun off of his table and hit Chris on the head several times with it. However, since Boo Ray was being suffocated, he didn't have the strength to knock Chris off of him. Finally, just to salvage his own life, he lowered the gun, put it under Chris's chest, and pulled the trigger.

The police arrested Boo Ray, and he was brought before a grand jury to see if he should stand trial for murder, manslaughter, or involuntary manslaughter. His attorney contacted Kevin and I, informing us that we would be subpoenaed, because we knew both men involved. Kevin and I went before the grand jury and testified, and we both knew it was a situation where if Boo Ray hadn't shot Chris, Chris would have killed him. Boo Ray did what he had to do. Thankfully, Boo Ray got off and has since gotten help for his alcohol and drug problems.

Testifying on Boo Ray's behalf was the right thing to do, because I knew beyond any reasonable doubt that it was exactly like Boo Ray said it was. Chris committed many violent acts in the last five years of his life. They were numerous, so this was nothing new. When Chris was drinking he was okay, but if he mixed drugs with alcohol, he was uncontrollable, and it was him against the world.

Chris was a tough guy, but a very refined guy. He was well educated, well read, well traveled, and came from a very good family. Yet, he still succumbed to drugs and alcohol. In a lot of ways, he was very much like Kerry Von Erich. No matter how much talent and education they had, they couldn't see their way out and there was no light at the end of the tunnel.

Chad was one of the pall bearers at Chris's funeral. I went to the funeral, as well, but I just stayed in the back. I hated it, and don't want those memories. I was also in the midst of a deep depression, because just prior to his death, Chris had been trying to get in touch with me - and I never returned his calls. Even though Chris and I were always tight, I was angry at him because of his addictions. After his death, I felt really bad, because in some way, it was as if he was reaching out to me and I wasn't there for him. That was a horrible time for me, and the guilt really messed me up for awhile.

Another one of my guys left too early. By that time, there had been too many - and all of them under preventable situations. When I think about Pak Song, I think about the wonderful times we shared, and when I think about Bruiser Brody, I think about our good times together. Unfortunately, my memories of Chris Adams are bad ones - very bad. I watched him struggle and fight, and it was a shame. He was such a smart guy, and he gave his life away to drugs and alcohol.

It's very difficult for me to deal with what has happened to so many World Class alumni. There's been a lot of tragedy, and although I've gone into details on the deaths of David, Kerry, Mike, and Chris Von Erich, Gino Hernandez, Bruiser Brody, and Chris Adams, so many others from World Class have died way before their time, like Terry Gordy, Rick Rude, Buzz Sawyer, Scott Irwin, referee Rick Hazzard, and ring announcer Ralph Pulley. David Von Erich has been dead for over twenty years now and it still breaks my heart when I think about it.



Although I have so many happy, positive memories of World Class, I have a lot of sad memories, too. I believe that World Class has the saddest legacy in wrestling, but I guess in the 80's, the times they were-a-changing, and everybody went a little bit too far.

I accept some of the responsibility for it, and know that I should have done more. I couldn't get Bobby Shane out of the bay, and for a long time that bothered me. I learned to live with that, and I have also learned to live with the Von Erich boys passing and Gino Hernandez's death - which was one of the worst days of my life. People like Bruiser Brody, the Von Erich's, and Gino will always be in my heart, but so will the guys who are still with us, like Don Jardine, Mark Lewin, and Tim Brooks.

Elton John's "Candle in the Wind" was written for Marilyn Monroe, and then rewritten for Princess Diana, but every time I hear that song I think of the rise and fall of World Class, and what could have been.

"The candle burned out long before the legend ever did."

I'm a big believer of fate and destiny, and I guess World Class wasn't destined to be anything other than what it was. It's amazing, because if you really stop and think, even with its amazing legacy – the World Class Championship Wrestling program was only on for eight years, and World Class was an actual promotion for just three of those years. That was it.

Imagine that.

# Chapter 63: My Life Today

When I first heard Vince McMahon open up about the business, I was horrified. Wrestlers of my generation were under the impression that if anyone broke the “oath” and told people that wrestling was manipulated - it would kill the business and wrestling would die a horrible death. I must admit that I was amazed that Vince’s admission didn’t kill the business. Yes, I was always aware that people knew wrestling wasn’t on the up-and-up, but was surprised that when they were told it wasn’t “real” they would still watch.

Vince is actually a very sharp businessman doing what I would have loved to have done with World Class. In the early 80’s, he had a plan: He wanted to be the King of Wrestling, so he took every opportunity available to him and he accomplished that. By exposing professional wrestling, he made a business decision that proved to be right, because I’ve seen the heights he has taken wrestling to, as well as the financial gains that wrestlers make. I accept the fact that he was right and the rest of us were wrong.

I still love wrestling and watch it - though I’m probably one of the few old timers who do. I’ll talk to other retired wrestlers and they’ll insist that they don’t watch wrestling - but c’mon! I was a wrestler for thirty years! I watch RAW and Smackdown as often as I can, and know all the storylines. What do you want to know? You want to know who did what to who last week? I can tell you! I still have a great love for wrestling, and I will always have that.

There’s a lot of great pieces of talent today, and when I see young guys that are really good - like Randy Orton or Kurt Angle - my heart starts pumping and my blood starts rushing. At times, I wish I could be a young kid again and manage and develop their careers the way I did with so many other guys. Then, I realize I’m not a young guy, and three days on the road would kill me.

I’m also so proud of guys like Shawn Michaels, The Undertaker, Steve Austin, Booker T, and John Bradshaw Layfield, and am glad I was able to touch their careers in some way. Since Vince turned wrestling into entertainment, I see how beneficial professional wrestling has been for them in so many ways, because they will have opportunities to make money off of T-shirts, dolls, books, and personal appearances long into retirement.

When I think about all those years I sat at the National Wrestling Alliance meetings, and how we could never agree on a lousy \$75 guarantee for the boys, it amazes me to see that Vince’s wrestlers all have downside guarantees. While some might stick up their nose at what that guarantee is - I remember all the old wrestlers of my generation who went up and down the highway and never made more than \$100 a night. And granted, the wrestlers in the WWE don’t have health plans or retirement benefits – but they will get residuals. The guys of my generation never had that. When my career was over – it was over. I don’t have anyone currently marketing the legacy of Gary Hart. I don’t have T-shirts, DVD’s, dolls, or pictures accruing me residual checks. That wasn’t afforded to me in my career. However, Vince McMahon has made that possible for the wrestlers of today. He has great marketing plans, and makes a lot of wrestlers a lot of money. Believe me when I tell you – the wrestling business is far better now than ever

before. For that, I am overjoyed – and can only wish those plans were in place when I was in wrestling.

With that said – I should add that I made a great living in wrestling. I didn't become a millionaire and I'm not rich, but because of what I did when I got my settlement from the crash, I'm comfortable. Sure, I've lost a few bucks over the years, but I still have my two children and my health – so what's a little cash? Life is more than money. For me, if my bills are covered, there's food in the cupboard, and my children are happy, then I don't need any more money, and I don't need to drive around in a Cadillac. The wrestling business provided me with things that I never even dreamed of having. If it weren't for wrestling, this kid from Halsted Street probably would have ended up in jail or dead in some alley - because I grew up with not many options to having a good life. I realize where I came from, can see the blessed life that I've had, and know that I owe everything I have to wrestling. I would have to be blind, deaf, and stupid not to see that. I've been blessed in so many ways, and I realize that, and that's why I'm not bitter that my career is over. I went through, got out, and moved on with my life. Believe it or not, that's one of the most difficult battles many wrestlers face.

Having Jason and Chad made it so easy for me to just put the wrestling part of my life behind me, because taking care of them was something that I could devote all my time to. I would get up in the morning, make breakfast for them, take them to school, and pick them up at the end of the day. I've had so much quality time with them since I left Atlanta that it's been the greatest time in my life. These days, my oldest son Jason is doing really good in radio. He produces and does the sports on a morning show called Daybreak USA, which is on in two-hundred markets. Chad goes to the gym and works independent shows hoping for an opportunity with WWE. Both of them are very close because they're only eighteen months apart, and they've always been best of friends. They're such good boys, and I'm so proud of them.

I'm very fortunate not to have any serious injuries from my career. Due to the crash in the bay, my wrist hurts when the weather turns bad, but over the years I've changed my diet, and take homeopathic pills to help with aches and pains. I'm very much a naturalist when it comes to drugs and medication, and if a doctor ever had to make a living off me, he would go broke! I come from very good genes, though. My ancestors come from England, Ireland, and Wales, and they're all healthy and hearty. My mother is 89, and both my grandmothers lived to be 90. My grandmother had nine children and thirty-nine grandchildren, and all the grandchildren are alive except for three.

So what am I up to these days, you ask? I'm living well, drinking green tea, smoking a bowl occasionally, and am very happy and content with my life. I'm on perpetual vacation - and believe me, it's nice. I have adjusted really well to retirement, and I did it slowly over a period of time. At least I think I'm well adjusted. Maybe I'm just kidding myself, and it's all just marijuana induced!

I'm currently living in north Texas, between Dallas and Fort Worth. I first came to Texas in 1966, and even though I was in and out of a lot of places, if you add up the years I spent in Texas wrestling organizations, about twenty of my thirty years were here. Needless to say, Texas is a very special place for me.

To this day, I still get recognized when I go out. I was on TV here for over twenty years, whether it was KTVT, WTBS, or World Class Championship Wrestling. One time, I went to a Willie Nelson concert, and this guy kept looking at me. Once you've been famous enough to turn heads, you get radar when someone recognizes you. Finally, I just looked at him and gave him a nod, and he came over, kneeled down beside me, and said, "Mr. Hart, I just want to thank you. My dad died over a long period of time with stomach cancer, and the only time he wasn't in tremendous pain was when he was calling you a 'sonofabitch' on Saturday nights."

I make regular personal appearances at fundraisers for The Boys and Girls Club, The YMCA, women's shelters, and homeless shelters. If my being there might make a difference in people showing up and donating something for those less fortunate, then I'm happy to lend my name.

In 1990, I put Gary Hart away, retiring that character when I left the NWA, and began looking at myself as an elder statesman. As I mentioned, I wasn't even thrilled to bring him back in the GWF, but did it for the good of Booker T and Stevie Ray. However, I did dust off the Gary Hart character once more, and brought him back in 2004 for an independent promoter named Court Bauer. He had a promotion by the name of Major League Wrestling, and taped shows out of Orlando, Florida, for the Sunshine Network. On the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the "I Quit" match between Terry Funk and Ric Flair, Court booked another "I Quit" match, this time with Terry Funk against Steve Corino. Court brought me in for the celebration, and I went out and heckled Terry Funk during his match, even though I felt uncomfortable being Gary Hart after all those years. Don't get me wrong, I'm still him - but now I'm more mellow and humorous. I did enjoy working the show, though, as well as getting to hang out with Terry Funk and JJ Dillon in the dressing room. Court also asked me to manage two young wrestlers that night named Low Ki and Homicide. I was very impressed with both of them. They're a little short, but extremely good, and very credible.

Because I've kept such a low profile over the years, countless rumors about me have surfaced. I've literally heard it all – from me being a bank robber to a report that I shot and killed two kids trying to rob a video store that I apparently owned, for which I had to do some time in jail. There are all kinds of nonsense out there, though, not only about me, but about the Von Erich's, as well, and it would be a full-time job to try and dispel all the myths floating around about World Class, so I don't even bother. However, a few years back I was contacted by a Chicago-based filmmaker named Brian Harrison, who asked if I would help him with an idea he had for a documentary on World Class. I told him off the bat that if it was going to be a smear piece then I wasn't interested, but he assured me he would do it right, and that his main agenda was to give credit to the people who truly created World Class. If someone wants to do something positive on World Class, I'm behind them all the way, and would do whatever I can to help keep the legacy of World Class alive and well. He came to interview me in November 2002, and then three months later he returned and, along with Kevin Von Erich, we went to Kevin's ranch to do some filming where Kerry Von Erich shot himself. Unfortunately, the sound for that particular shoot got messed up and the footage couldn't be used. Brian returned in the spring and he and I did some additional shoots at the Will Rogers Coliseum and my favorite Mexican restaurant. It was a lot of hard work and took Brian over four years to make, but I'm very pleased

with the DVD. It's called "Heroes of World Class: The Story of the Von Erich's and The Rise and Fall of World Class Championship Wrestling," and it really came out great.

I didn't do Wrestling Fanfests until Sir Oliver Humperdink dragged me to one. I'm glad he did – because I had a great time. Prior to that, the only feedback I ever received from the fans were fists, spit, kicks, and stabs. The type of reaction I get now is stunning. I'm now "Mr. Hart," people are happy to see me, and they thank me for the memories! Some of these fans are so gracious, and some tell me things that are heart wrenching. One told me, "Watching World Class Championship Wrestling was the only time I ever spent with my father because he worked all the time - but when that came on, he stopped what he was doing and spent time with me."

He then put his arms around me and gave me a big hug, saying, "Thank you for all the memories."

I had a wonderful career. I started off as wrestler, then became a manager, and was fortunate enough to become an assistant to two brilliant guys - Jim Barnett and Bill Watts – before I became a booker in 1974. As a booker, I was heavily involved in Florida's legendary run of 1974, the first-ever Omni sellout, and the very first Starrcade. When I took over the reins in Texas in 1976, I navigated the company through some pretty tumultuous changes and wars, helped develop World Class, and booked the Christmas night 1982 angle. Through it all, I developed the careers of legendary names like The Spoiler, the Von Erich boys, Bruiser Brody, Gino Hernandez, The Great Kabuki, King Kong Bundy, The Warrior and The Great Muta, among others.

These days, people identify me mainly with World Class, even though I spent so many years on TBS, and was involved in so many other territories. That's fine by me, though, because of all my accomplishments, helping create World Class is my pride and joy. It's the crown jewel on everything and the #1 crowning glory of my career.

I'm also proud that I had thirty years on top. It's amazing, but in reality, I never saw myself as anything other than a guy who had a good eye for talent. All the success I had didn't come from me - it came from the guys that I surrounded myself with. If you took Don Jardine, Bruiser Brody, the Von Erich boys, Dusty Rhodes, Gino Hernandez, The Great Kabuki, and The Great Muta away, what would my career have been?

So that's my story. If legacy is important, I think I have a good one. Perhaps in this book I come off like a hard-headed, "My way or the highway" kind of guy, but that's the way I was. Remember, though: I never did it for me - I did it for my talent. You might think I was stupid for walking out of the WWF in 1984 and the NWA in 1990, but I have too much respect for myself to allow anyone to degrade me in any way. Others might have put up with it and looked the other way, but I had to do what I had to do, and I'm not sad that things went the way that they did. I had a long career, I always made money, and I left on my own terms – and that's important to me.

I'm quite happy with the choices I made, and I have no regrets. And in the immortal words of basketball coach Bobby Knight, I hope they bury me face down, so my critics can kiss my ass.